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BRING ME MY BOW

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BRING ME MY BOW

BY

MAURICE MOISEIWITSCH

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BRING ME MY BOW

I

BOY HAYWARD picked up the pile of letters and, referring to his notes, sat down at his writing-table to answer them. He unscrewed his fountain-pen, tested it, then, filling his pipe from the large jar of tobacco—not too full and not too tightly packed in the bowl—he lit it carefully and then began to write methodically.

To GEORGE PHILLIPS, Esq., Cricket Club, Peterborough, Surrey.

DEAR GEORGE,

July 3rd, 1940.

Thanks for yours of the eighth. As I was away I could not answer sooner. I enclose cheque for my annual subscription. Please put my name down provisionally for the match against Westbrouke, I hope I shall be available then.

Give all my best regards to the chaps.

I'm very sorry about Frank. Do express my condolences to Martin.

I hope that I shall not have to give up the secretaryship of the club. As a matter of fact, I can deal with any correspondence regarding fixtures, and, I may tell you, I am angling for a date with Merton XI with, I believe, some fair prospects of success! Should I be forced to give up the secretaryship for any reason, I have made provisions for all correspondence to be transferred to the club.

Very sincerely,

B. A. HAYWARD.

The next letter was to L. D. Clayton, Esq., 73B Newbolt Street, Eastcheap.

DEAR MR. CLAYTON,

I do not know how to thank you for your kind wishes and your very generous decision to continue paying my full salary. I really feel very delighted that you should, after such a brief association with me, think I deserve such consideration, and I heartily reciprocate your good wishes.

Please give all my best regards to Mr. Wilber and the members of the staff.

Yours sincerely,

B. ALAN HAYWARD.

Then to Robert Wilber, Esq., 42 Grove Terrace, St. John's Wood, N.W.11.

DEAR ROBERT,

Thanks awfully for fixing the salary for me. I got a charming letter from the old man—he's a decent old stick!—and his concern for me is quite touching! I have written him to-day, thanking him.

As for my news—I got through my exams and tests all right and I am very keen to have a go at the new job. I'll write you as soon as there's anything worth telling. Give my best wishes to Gloria and the infant. I'll drop you a line whenever I'm free and, if convenient, call. By the by, I hear that Roger is coming down at the end of term. Can you possibly interest him in joining our club? We'll be honoured to have another Cambridge blue—he'll remember Maynard, who's our opening bat.

Judith sends love to you and Gloria and the kid.

All the best,

Yours,

B. A. H.

PS.—I ran into Frankie Vance the other day. He's got a posh new Daimler and was with a very smart, overdressed and underdressed cabaret beauty. He tells me he did jolly well with the franc, playing bear just before the collapse of France. I gave him a piece of my mind, I can tell you. I think this sort of trade in a comrade's distress is the limit, and I hope you won't ask him along when you know I'll be calling. Sorry, but I can't help feeling this way about it, particularly when one hears about poor Shaw and Terry-Grant at Dunkirk. What a road some fellows have travelled since those days at Coll! Remember how he used to spout égalité et fraternité in the Union!

Then to the Editor, *New Statesman and Nation*, W.C.2.

DEAR SIR,

*Will you please accept a suggestion from a very old contributor. . . . I have been a reader of your paper for years and have always championed its views against the bombastic shibboleths of any Tory with a red bee in his bonnet. My suggestion is this: would you please tone down some of the *This England* items. I may say that I have personally always enjoyed the series, which I think are tremendously funny. Unfortunately Dr. Goebbels seems to agree with us, and I have heard broadcasts from the German radio quoting from it freely and with relish.*

Whereas I heartily endorse your view that we should laugh at our follies, that Dr. Goebbels should join us to me seems an excess of good-humour.

Yours truly,
B. A. HAYWARD.

Then to Mrs. Godfrey Charwell, 18 Allenby Square, London, W.1.

MY DEAR AUNTIE,

Thank you so much for your gift, which was really too generous of you. I daren't show it to Dick and Judith because I'm afraid they'll feel jealous, but of course mother and dad know, and I believe mother is writing you. Thanks, too, for your invite for the 23rd and I'll do my very best to come. But please don't bother to ask your friend Sir Arthur about that job in the Ministry, I'm quite happy where I am. On the other hand, I'd very much like to meet his brother, whose account my firm has been trying to get for some time, and it will do me a power of good with old Mr. Clayton if I can persuade him to let us handle his affairs.

Thanks again for everything; I don't know why you take so much trouble for me! I certainly don't deserve it!

By the by, what does Jean want for a birthday present? Don't let her know I asked. Tell David I'll try to come along on Sports Day. Give my love to both. I'm looking forward to the party no end and to see you all.

Affectionately,
Boy.

Boy Hayward finally picked up a letter from his oldest and best friend, Jeremy Blake, which had been written from a well-known London club. He re-read it slowly, seeing the personality of that young man in the spirited, generously-sprawling handwriting. He wrote his last letter, smiling a little, but with a faint cloud of pain in his pleasant brown eyes.

The letter ran:

MY DEAR JO,

Well, old son, I got through my exams and tests all right, as you predicted, and I can't help feeling very pleased with myself. I believe I got 93 per cent for the maths, but otherwise did not distinguish myself. Well, that's that. A new life begins. A new life . . . but somehow, sitting in my little room with its old

books, from old school prizes to the odd collection of biography of explorers, Shakespeare's sonnets, Russell's essays, that political tract by Kropotkin over which we used to have such gorgeous arguments, Nietzsche's *Thoughts Out of Season*, Conrad's *Youth* and *Lord Jim*, and all the hundred and one well-thumbed books that revive so many memories—and the few trinkets tucked away in my desk which invoke thoughts of old matches against Marlborough, Winchester and the others, I can't help feeling that the new life can't make any real difference, that my roots here are too deep, that the other is something temporary, like an illness or a bad dream that must pass away. How many of us have felt it! And how many have returned to their homes and looked at the stretch of lawn and flower-beds, the favourite armchair worn smooth by one's body in old days, and feel that they are seeing them all with new eyes.

In spite of everything, things seem to go on as before. I have just turned down Phillips' offer to relieve me of my duties as secretary of the cricket club; my little conspiracy with Bob Wilber has proved a success and the firm continue to pay my salary; I have written to Aunt Elinor, who I know has always had a soft spot for me—you know, she's the one that married into the Charwell side of the family—and she doesn't know what to do to help me; I take her side in all the family feuds—I've got my head screwed on the right way, as you always maintained!—and she invites me to all those big parties she throws in town and introduces me to dukes or continental ballet dancers at a word! I even write a letter to the *New Statesman* and *Nation* with just as much solemnity as the old man writes to *The Times*—as though it matters a snowball in hell!

No, I don't see it! Life must go on as before . . . they can't uproot a third of the earth's surface—you know, the part on which the sun—well, not as easily as they can our fair, tragic, violated sister, France. What does it mean? A battle has been fought and lost . . . the war goes on. We must win in the end, I have no doubt about it. God, won't it be fun to sail down the Danube again and have icy beer and cheese in an old German tavern by the mountains again! To read Goethe and hear—oh, well, the war hasn't been won yet.

So much for nostalgia . . . that the war must be won seems to me to be absolutely imperative. It's a job that's been long delayed. Germany has been on a war basis for seven years, we for two: that in a nutshell explains our failures so far. But it can't last and we shall win. Our job is to finish it as quickly and

painlessly as possible. All the people who talk now of our diplomatic blunders in the past, our connivance with German industrialists to preserve the balance of power against France and Russia—although they are right, nevertheless what's the use of crying over spilt milk? We've cleared the old blunderers from the Government—and, thank heaven, there are no Quislings or Laval's left—and we must get this mess cleared up. If a house is on fire it's no use arguing about who dropped the live cigarette-end, we must run for the hose! Well, so much for the war.

My other news in brief is simply this: I met a delightful girl recently who's staying with us the week-end. Her name's Helen Faversham and she's a friend of Judith's. She's tall, with lovely brown hair that looks a pretty chestnut when the sun's on it, blue eyes and the softest red mouth—you know, bee-stung! Her figure displays such delightful, seemingly uninhabited charms that one longs for la vie bohême, and yet, there is no denying it, part of her beauty lies in the intrinsic innocence of this young lady, which surrounds her like an invisible crystal shell and guards her fair honour! She's romantic, of course, reads Shelley, sighs over Pelleas and Melisande by the hour, and believes that war is merely an opportunity contrived by a divine authority for men to display their gallantry in protecting her maidenly virtues from the Nazi invader. She doesn't say so, of course, but it is suggested in everything she does or says; she is terribly spoiled, sees everything in terms of her honour or beauty; the war revolves round her, and every speech of Hitler is a direct threat to her virginity; altogether, I find her adorable.

A word to you, my friend. Don't, on any account, play the fool with A.G.'s wife; honestly, Jo, you know I'm no prude, but this isn't a question of morality—I know how much she means to you, and that is all that really matters. But these things never work out in the end. A.G. has the deuce of a lot of influence with certain directors, and what starts as an idyllic romance inevitably flounders in the morass of a broken career. You know what I mean, and I know you won't think me impertinent for saying this.

Well, let me hear from you soon. I must go down now for that delightful family rite, afternoon tea . . . with Helen as our principal guest, the ceremony can indeed be as charming as the family believes it to be.

All best wishes,
Yours ever,
Boy.

Boy dried the letter, sealed it in an envelope and collected the little pile. He went to the mirror that stood on the small Sheraton urn table and combed his hair and straightened his tie.

He looked at his reflection in the mirror and was not displeased with his appearance. He was a tall young man with fair hair that he had difficulty in brushing flat, brown eyes with tiny crows' feet at the sides that made his smile very pleasant and infectious, a handsome, slightly aquiline nose and a firm mouth; his chin had a slight cleft.

He looked about his room a moment or two before locking his desk. It was, as has already been conveyed in his letter, a very popular type of bachelor room with its big battered mahogany book-case filled with hundreds of well-thumbed volumes from mountaineering to music; it had a large brass-fitted oak chest in which he kept all his sports kit and cups, two enormous leather armchairs and a bearskin rug, one or two nice artistic paintings of the late Impressionist period which he prized highly, and an etching by Picasso which hung over his couch. His mantelpiece was littered with leather albums of family and school and 'varsity groups, pipes, a mountain horn and such souvenirs. The whole had an effect of solidity, durability. He looked out of the window on the large garden with its truly magnificent plane trees, its well-kept lawn and flower-beds, its ancient crazy pavements and green-house, its weather-beaten garden seat backed by wild rose-bushes in full bloom, and the cloud of pain appeared in his eyes once more for a moment.

At last he went downstairs. The family were assembled in the lounge, and although Boy had seen them in this setting thousands of times, he felt a slight pang of nostalgia, as though this actual scene had occurred in a dream of forgotten tranquillity.

His father was sitting in his armchair with its back to the french windows, his mother sat opposite, and the silver tea-set was laid out on linen on an occasional table. His sister Judith and his brother Richard were chatting with Helen, and the old man interpolated a few remarks from time to time. His mother was silent, and her wistful nervous movements as she poured out the tea, made Boy feel curiously restless.

"Come along, dear," said his mother, "I've sugared your tea." She handed him his cup and he sat down. She was a tall, graceful woman with nervous, sensitive features, fair and still very handsome. Boy had inherited her good looks and colouring, her charming smile, but the strong hands with their thick wrists, the rather abrupt speech, was his father's.

Richard was saying, "If they do start on London it will be bad

for this reason: Jerry has about eight capitals to our one. We have only London, they have Berlin, Paris, Vienna, Prague, Oslo, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Brussels—have I missed any, Boy? ”

“Only Rome.”

There was a laugh.

“I know,” said Helen, with a sigh. “What a pity they have so many great cities in their power. What a tragic fate for poor, lovely Paris, for gay Vienna. . . . Isn’t it a shame? Tanks parked in the taxi ranks outside the gardens. . . . Paris! And poor, beautiful Vienna with its—its waltzes and everything! ”

Boy said good-humouredly, “By the way, Helen, were you ever in Vienna? ”

She blushed. “No, but . . . I know it must have been very lovely just the same.”

Judith laughed and young Miss Faversham got up with a very dignified air and walked into the garden.

“There!” said Mrs. Hayward, “now you’ve hurt the girl’s feelings. I don’t know what you young people think you’re about, upsetting her in this way.”

“Oh, I think she’ll get over it,” said Boy, smiling. “I suppose, though, I’d better go out and make it up.”

But he finished his tea calmly before doing so.

“Do you think they will start on London?” asked Judith.

“I shouldn’t like to say,” said Richard. “What do you think, Boy? They’ve got all those new dromes in Northern France now, which gives them a great advantage. If they really take a good hard crack at London—well, they could easily start a fire that will prove disastrous.”

“What a horrible shame,” said Judith. “And all our friends there . . . it’s terrible. Do you think they could really destroy London? ”

“A dozen mass raids might do it. Do you remember that Wells’ film? Gosh, what a nightmare! If the Nazis went all out they could reduce London in a week, I should think,” said Richard, and there was a trace of fascinated awe in his voice.

“You bloodthirsty devil,” said Judith with anguish. “I suppose you’ll play the organ or the violin. But I can’t believe it! Think of all those lovely buildings and dear old Piccadilly. . . . Oh, it’s too frightful. And what will happen to the people we know? I couldn’t bear it if anything were to happen to our friends. Do you think they could destroy London like that, Boy? ”

“No,” said Boy.

"Of course they could," said Richard. "Look what they did to Warsaw in a few days!"

"London," said Boy, "is different."

"Go on!" jeered Richard. "Die hard, eh, what? British phlegm will put out the fire-bombs, I suppose. You know jolly well that all the experts have been justified in their predictions of raids."

"Not only the people," said Boy, "but London itself. It has taken about a thousand years to build, don't forget."

"So what? The experts say that a mass-raid by five hundred bombers could scatter about a thousand tons of incendiary bombs over London. A thousand years to build! The bigger they are the harder they fall."

"London is nearly seven hundred square miles," said Boy.

"Fires spread for miles. The more buildings the more fuel. You're just being wishful, that's what."

Boy said nothing.

"Admit it!"

Boy shook his head.

"That's right," said Mr. Hayward, "stick up for London, Boy. One should always stick up for one's birthplace, eh, son?" Then he buried himself in his paper once more.

Richard went on to give horrific details about the results of Nazi raids, a detailed analysis of the predictions of experts and other unchallengeable sources, and wound up a lengthy argument with his original theme.

Boy said, "Well, that's all very well . . . on paper. But London is not on paper."

Then he got up and went into the garden to talk to Helen. She was sitting in a hammock, her pretty head rested in her hands, staring dreamily at the blue summer sky.

"Hallo," he said, and gently set the hammock in motion. "Am I interrupting a lovely dream of Vienna, or is it Paris of the court of Charlemagne?"

"Please don't be tiresome. I was thinking. . . ."

"Would you care to join us in the drawing-room, or shall I ask them to move the tea-party into the garden?"

Her "bee-stung" lips pouted and she turned away. He jumped into the hammock beside her.

"I say, Helen," he said seriously, "I am sorry, really. I didn't mean to offend you."

"My dear boy, what on earth gave you the idea that anything you said could possibly matter to me?"

"Listen, Helen, do be serious. I'm deeply sorry, and I apologize humbly. Please forgive me," he said, giving her his most charming smile.

She blinked a few times in an attempt not to reciprocate it, but in the end she had to give in. He took her hand, plump and youthful, and began to thrust at the turf with his heels vigorously. The hammock began to swing higher and higher until she thought they would fall out.

"That's enough, Boy. Stop!"

But he merely laughed and, getting a good grip, levered them still higher until she screamed with laughter and clung to him for safety. He snatched a kiss.

"Boy!"

"Oh, stow it, Helen!" At first she struggled in his arms, forgetting her fear of falling, but in the end submitted to a long kiss.

"Helen," he said breathlessly, "I meant to tell you this before. I like you awfully. I know this may sound as though I'm rushing things a bit, but these days . . . well, I don't have to explain. Anyway, won't you do a show with me in town one day? You like Italian opera, don't you? They are doing Tosca. . . ."

"I couldn't. . . ."

"Why not?"

"Well, I have to find out. Daddy is very strict. Besides, I promised to see it with Reggie Vereker."

"Oh, that blighter. You don't really want to, do you?"

She looked thoughtful a moment. "Won't you come to a party at home? There'll be dancing."

"Yes, of course. I'd like that. But I want to see you alone."

"Come to my party next week . . . and we'll see."

"All right. That's a date. If anything happens I can phone you, can't I?"

"Yes, I'm in in the mornings till eleven almost every day."

She slipped out of his arms as he tried to kiss her again.

"We'd better go back," she said. "They'll think I have no manners at all."

"No, they won't mind," said Boy. "Let's stay out here a little longer."

"Are you sure they won't mind?"

"Of course not. You know, Helen, you're a strange girl."

She settled back to listen, without, of course, giving the appearance of doing so.

"Am I? In what way?"

"Well, you seem to be a little bit unreal, as though things that

happen don't touch you. Everything you do, all your interests seem to be apart from reality . . . your ballet classes, your music lessons with that fantastic Italian teacher of yours, and when people talk of the war you just catch one or two odd things about Vienna or Paris and turn it into some personal romance."

"Do I? But the war is frightfully boring, isn't it? Would you like me to discuss military tactics with you, Boy?" she said, and smiled.

"No, I just want you to stay as you are. But I am trying to understand you, dear."

"I wish you could. I am always trying to understand myself, but I can't. Simply can't!" She sighed with profound enjoyment.

"You're a funny girl. I don't know whether you are real or not. You seem to be made up of bits of cloud. When I talk to you you only listen to things here and there, the rest passes over you like water off a duck's back; I never feel I am making any impression on you. God help the man who falls helplessly in love with you. You'll avoid him as though he suffers from epilepsy."

"How can you say such a thing, Boy!"

"Well, you've never returned any of your innumerable boy friends' love, have you? And you always slip out of any situation you want to avoid by appealing to your parent's authority—you say, 'Daddy is very strict!' as though you don't do just as you like with your father."

She was startled and pained. "How can you think that of me, Boy!"

"I'm sorry, but you hurt me, too. I've only known you a couple of days, but already I have heard of all your 'tiresome' boy-friends who write sixteen-page letters which you hardly ever answer, give you their 'wings' and you don't even remember their names, and when one of them frantically tries to date you up you invite him to a meeting of all the boy-friends at home where you can queen it over everyone."

"If you think that of me, perhaps you wouldn't like to come to my party, after all."

"Half a loaf is better than none, beggars can't be choosers, and what have you. I'll attend your court, my dear."

"Well!"

He kissed her quickly again. Whenever they kissed she became stiff, tried to avert her mouth a moment and blinked nervously.

"Now we must go," she said, and slipped down from the hammock, but just before she ran off she pressed his hand involuntarily.

Nobody remarked on their absence. There was a tacit loyalty and solidarity amongst the members of the family, and when Boy found that there was a slight stain of lipstick on his mouth some time later he chuckled to think of their restraint.

"Some more tea?" asked Judith of her friend, and Helen sat down with a pretty smile for thanks.

"I hear that old Mr. Phillips has joined the Home Guard as a sergeant and is drunk with power," said Richard.

This started one of those interminable heated discussions about friends and neighbours, introduced the type of joke known as family, and left the male members of the household quite exhausted whilst the womenfolk were just getting into their stride. Hints of scandal followed on gossip, and revealed Judith and Helen as past masters of the art of character dissection, and with an instinctive understanding of human motives and behaviour that would have done credit to a psychiatrist; a good time was had by all. Yet Helen became silent after a time as she began to suspect that as soon as she departed she would be subjected to as severe and hearty a dissection; but here she under-rated the family's discretion regarding a person who was known to be particularly well liked by a Hayward. The Haywards had their loyalties to each other to a fine degree, and were a sensible and sensitive family; if Boy liked Helen, then the other Haywards would see only good points in her.

They were, in fact, very nice people. Robert Hayward, the head of the family, was a retired bank manager of the Loughborough branch of a well-known firm. He had been to sea as a young man, but his fiancée, a Marchant and the youngest daughter of a London business man, could not see any prospects for him or for a proper home life, and through influence managed to get him an entry into a big London bank where, with his cheerful manner and quick, practical brain, he became a fair success. He was an easy-going yet very capable man, had an equal charm for men as for women, and could adapt himself easily to his new life. He had broad views as a young man, but had an instinct for the correct thing, too, and his wife was relieved to find that the young man was at home in a drawing-room as on the quarter-deck. Yet some of his friends were quite impossible, and she had to exercise a great deal of tact and sympathy in her severing of ties from his old comrades. Some of

happen don't touch you. Everything you do, all your interests seem to be apart from reality . . . your ballet classes, your music lessons with that fantastic Italian teacher of yours, and when people talk of the war you just catch one or two odd things about Vienna or Paris and turn it into some personal romance."

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"No, I just want you to stay as you are. But I am trying to understand you, dear."

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"Well!"

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friends; people liked his frank and simple nature, he was equally at home with the son of the duke as of the scholarship boy who had sprung from a docker's family, had a staunch common sense which invited innumerable confidences, and, as nobody considered him worth being jealous of, was perhaps one of the most popular men in his year. A few months after passing his degree in Science with an Honours First he got a good job with a London firm, but it was understood that his aunt was paving the way for a place in her husband's shipping company as soon as he had had some business experience.

In spite of his success his head was never turned, and he had a habit of not revealing his latest triumph in Richard's presence as he could not bear to see his brother depressed at the widening gulf between them. Richard, however, was never jealous, and once remarked: "Well, Boy's my brother and sort of part of me, and I couldn't feel jealous of his getting on, as it seems to be my success, too." This simple-hearted remark moved Boy very deeply.

Nor was the brothers' regard for the sister any the less deep; they conspired to please her, and made a tactful but searching examination of any young man who sought her society. The children were very fond of their parents, with the exception of Judith, who was, at times, unduly exasperated with her mother's soft, tenacious desire to run the family according to her ideas.

Tea was cleared away by the maid, and a contented silence followed for a while.

"I say, mother," said Boy suddenly.

"Yes, darling?"

"I wonder . . . if . . ." Boy looked uncomfortable a moment, casting a glance at Helen.

"What is it?"

"I wonder if we've still got that record of Sam Porter." He blushed.

"Why, of course we have," said Mrs. Hayward. "Put it on, will you, Richard. It's just beside that pile of books and things near you—in the cabinet."

"All right, I'll get it," said Boy, rising promptly. He made Richard return to his armchair, and began to search for the record. It was a very ancient favourite of his, bought him for his fifteenth birthday, a north country monologue with a very droll but broad humour. For some reason Boy had always fancied it,

not that he failed to see that the jokes were second-rate, but the comedian's dry manner had always enchanted him. For weeks after he had heard it he could not be persuaded to speak normally, and was at such pains to reproduce the humorist's dialect that he drove the family frantic. It was an old family joke.

"I say, Helen, this is simply awful, you know. North country dialect stuff. Do you mind?" asked Boy.

"What a question!" said Boy's mother. "Why should she?"

Helen was a little taken aback, and Mrs. Hayward, quickly recovering her wits, added, "I'm sorry, but the girl looked so tongue-tied that I spoke for her. Do you mind, my dear?"

"No, of course not. Put it on."

Boy lit his pipe and put on the record.

The family listened to the familiar jokes in silence. After a minute or so Boy was laughing. His laughter grew until he could hardly control it and rocked in his chair. Helen was only faintly amused and, after a time, ceased to listen.

"Well, I must say I enjoyed that," said Boy apologetically. "It always gets me."

"Don't sound so apologetic," said Richard. He said to Helen, "He's only had the record for seven years. One of these days he'll see the remaining jokes and we'll have some peace in the house."

There was a laugh. Boy said good-humouredly, "I know it's an awful trial to the others, but that chap's dialect is delicious. I promise I won't inflict it on you again—not till after the war, when people won't mind so much."

"I'll keep you to that," said Richard.

There was another silence whilst Boy searched through some other records.

"Does anyone mind?" he said.

"No, go ahead," said Mr. Hayward.

"They'll be new to you, Helen, so you won't mind if I amuse myself."

She shook her head, smiling graciously.

The others talked in whispers whilst Boy listened.

After half an hour or so Boy refilled his pipe absent-mindedly and began to light it in long puffs.

"I say, Boy, do you have to go on smoking that awful pipe?" said Judith.

Mrs. Hayward said with strange pain, "Oh, *do* let him smoke his pipe if he wants to—on this of all days."

Her eyes were very bright and her lower lip trembled dangerously.

"Mother," said Judith with intense irritation, "you *promised!*"

Helen politely looked away. Boy rose and put his arm round his mother with a cheerful smile. "Oh, stow it, mother!"

That evening, after dinner (which passed very pleasantly with some bottles of champagne that had been saved specially for the occasion), Mr. Hayward, as though by accident, discovered that he had some good brandy in the library, and said to Boy in a conspiratorial whisper, "Come along, son, and help me finish it."

Boy followed his father into his room, which was a cunning combination of style and comfort, and beside the Tudor fireplace were ranged the most sumptuous armchairs in the house. There was oak panelling, a handsome mahogany desk, some clever copies of Constable landscapes in dusty gold frames, a model of H.M.S. *Hood* in a glass case together with some old navigation instruments, and a collection of South Sea shells and the jawbone of a shark beside a leather-bound volume on Tort law.

The old man sat down opposite his son and ceremoniously poured out the brandy in balloon glasses.

They sat, warming the glasses in their hands and inhaling the bouquet of the brandy, discussing its superlative qualities. Then there was a brief pause.

Boy looked at his father a little awkwardly, but rather moved by something at once sincere and helpless in his manner.

"You know, Boy," he said at length, "I've been through it all myself, and . . . on the whole . . . one shouldn't listen to the talk of all those pacifist writers . . . the fellows who spouted about wars in the past. You know, it's not all mud and zero hour. . . . I had . . . in a way . . . a great experience . . . comradeship and all that sort of thing . . . great fellows, most of them . . . and a healthy life in the open air and no responsibility . . . the army's the greatest club in the world . . . and one needn't worry about being afraid at first. . . . I was in a blue funk myself the first time . . . but afterwards I took no more notice than . . . than . . ." He stopped and made a gesture of embarrassment, then gulped down his brandy. "You know, in a way, it's the best time I ever had . . . seeing the world, meeting fine fellows . . . getting away from routine work and a pack

of imbecile females chattering about their neighbours like a lot of monkeys . . . when you come home women adore you, and you see just enough of them to think them wonderful . . . yes, son, the best time of my life in a way. I . . . I'm not worried about you . . . you've got a good head on those capable young shoulders of yours and you know how to take care of yourself. . . . You're a chip of the old block, and the Haywards always come through all right. Look at me . . . four years of real warfare . . . none of this super armour protection you get these days. . . . Why, war these days is like an Aldershot Tattoo . . . all show . . . like a Hollywood film . . . and . . . and I came through without a scratch. . . . I . . . I know you'll like it, son."

Boy had a queer feeling in his throat. "Thanks for the lecture, dad. You know, I'm not really afraid a bit. I don't want to sound conceited, but really that side doesn't bother me too much. It's jolly decent of you to try to encourage me like this, but I know that what you're saying isn't the real thing at all. It doesn't matter though," he added hastily, "a bit of danger won't bother me, nor will the other things. I think I know what it will be like, but I'm quite willing, even happy, to put up with it. I expect war to be like none of the things you mentioned. Not a grand life and a grand comradeship and wild times in the West End when on leave and seeing the world. No, I expect war to be a bloody nuisance, a hellish waste of time, a bore . . . but what of it? It's like an operation . . . one goes through it for the sake of one's health . . . it's painful, there's a bit of risk attached, but in the end it's the only way out. The only thing that ever bothered me in this war was the moral side of it, you know. I'm a sociable chap, and I always prided myself in thinking that I haven't an enemy in the world, but there's no use in reasoning with these swine . . . it's been tried before, and the only way to deal with them is to give them a good hiding. You know, dad, when Chamberlain went to Munich I was frightfully upset . . . not because there might be war . . . but that he might sell out Czecho to save us. . . . I felt pretty rotten. And when Poland fell I hated myself that we stood by without giving any decent help. When I read about the way they treat the people they have liberated—these operatic supermen—I—I—shivered. I remember that I read through a report on the way they treated some of the Polish girls, and—and looking out into the garden I saw Judith playing tennis. She was running and laughing, and her eyes were alight with fun, and I thought, 'There, but for the grace of God . . .' No, dad! Don't give me

any of the power and glory stuff; I know this war will be a bloody mess, I know there must be times when I'll feel miserable and frightened to death, I know that at best it will be deadly dull and incredibly wasteful of the best years of my life, but I'll see it through all right. I know I will. Why, there's been nothing like it in history, this scientific blood-sucking, this organized hatred, this mechanized annihilation of freedom, kindness and tolerance."

The old man's voice was husky when he said, "All right, son. I see you don't have to learn from me, after all."

When they rose a little later they were discussing family affairs. Mr. Hayward stopped, and Boy, sensing his sudden emotion, clasped his hand in his youthful strong grip, and for a long time neither said a word.

2

MARSDEN poked his head in through the doorway and said, "I say, fellers, look what Ross Haines' ma sent him!"

"What is it?" asked Bill Farson. "Looks like a sweater to me."

"Sweater nothing. It's bullet-proof!"

"What! B——" Farson's roar of glee was echoed by the others. A circle formed round Marsden immediately and, as they investigated, they rocked with laughter.

"Where's Ross?"

"He's with the old man. I say, let's try it out."

"Okay, Harry. Come along. Hang it up on a line."

They all left the mess and hurried out into the flying field.

"Corporal!" yelled Bill Farson.

"Yes, s——"

"Get me a Bren gun."

Whilst this weapon was being procured the protective garment was hung up on a fence near the corner of the field. With solemn ceremony it was treated with a burst from the machine-gun and then carefully examined.

"Poor Ross!"

They took their hats off or pushed their helmets back as the derelict garment was carefully buried.

When Ross Haines came into the mess-room a little later he was staggered at his reception. Bill Farson screamed and fainted, and four others, with cries of "Ghosts!" made for the doorway.

Haines had to resign himself to his position. For the next week he would be the butt of their good-natured ragging; that is, unless in the meantime they could project their jocularities on some other comrade who showed some weakness.

A fortnight had passed since Boy Hayward finished the brief leave period after his training and reported for duty at the base. During that time he had met and become at home with his comrades of the squadron. He had been as severely tested as any newcomer, had answered their ragging with spirit and countered their leg-pulling skilfully. He had picked out the more interesting men and found a ready response to his friendly manner. They were a very mixed crowd—a solicitor, one or two recent graduates from the Universities, an engineer, a radio entertainer, a salesman, a schoolmaster, a Polish count, a research student, a young explorer, men from every walk of life, of different outlooks and temperament, united now in a common effort. Their high spirits were a little overwhelming at first, but Boy soon discovered that there was a strong psychological motive for it: the intensity at which they lived necessitated some release, there was just a touch of hysteria in all this laughter and ragging, which disappeared as soon as the squadron was called out, when an immediate change of manner became apparent; conversation ceased, voices became pitched higher than normal, speech was jerky and confined to brief question and answer about tactics, movements were high-strung. So far Boy had not been called out for action, the enemy raids were confined to a few reconnaissance flights, which were dealt with in the main by the experienced members of the squadron—Farson, Haines, Murray, Stavenden, all aces, most of them ‘veterans’ from France, men who always came back. But there was a feeling in the air that a storm was brewing; nobody discussed the matter, but all knew that these flights were a preparation to a big trial ahead.

Boy sat in his flying kit, pretending to write a letter, and watched Bill Farson’s easy manner with envy.

“All right, Harry, I can see your bluff,” said Farson. “It’s dribbling down your tie.”

Harry Wainwright cursed heartily and threw his cards in. Only the Pole, austere, inscrutable, with one eyebrow raised slightly higher than the other, remained in the game. Farson wiped his brow in agitation. “I’ll see you. What have you got?”

“All the royal family,” said the count.

Farson threw his cards down. “I’ll be a monkey’s uncle. These

foreigners pinch our girls, clean us out, and we fight for their independence. How much was the last bid, you crook? Here, deal me another."

"I say, Hayward old thing," said Haines, "I've got a demmed quaint little thing heah. Jolly amusin', though I can't for the life of mah make head or tail of it. Listen."

He put on the record with the tender care of a connoisseur. He regulated the instrument delicately. Nobody was allowed to touch these records which were Haines' special weakness.

*"Hold tight! Hold tight! Hold tight! Hold tight!
Foo-oorre—acki—sacki—
Got some sea-food—ma-mma—
Shrimpers and rice. They're very nice,"*

sang the instrument with light-hearted inanity.

Haines listened to the end, completely expressionless.

"Quaint, what? What do you think it means? I mean to say, demmed funny, what? But what on earth is it about?"

Melville was saying, "About that Messerschmitt——"

"Shut up, can't you? I've got your queen in check."

"Now listen, fellers, this is interesting. This Messer——"

"Your queen, Johnnie."

"What about her, old boy?"

"She's in check, old boy."

"Oh, yes. I see. Thanks——"

"Now this Messer——"

A chorus rang out:

*"There was I,
Thirty thousand feet up—
Upside down,
Hanging from my straps—
Oh, what could I do?"*

Completely unruffled, Melville continued: "Listen, fellers. I saw her fly out of a heavy pile of clouds, see. I thought she didn't spot me—it was so tricky up there amongst all those clouds, so I waited until she was about a thousand yards away, see. Five hundred. Three. Two. Then I gave her a burst. She just vanished. Got her, I thought. See, fellers, couldn't possibly have missed her from that range!"

*"... hanging from my straps,
Upside down—
Oh, what could I do?"*

“Just a minute, fellers. I didn’t get her, see. I was just turning home when—through another break in the clouds I saw her. She was rushing straight at me. Shock of my life, I tell you. Still, couldn’t miss her now. Three hundred yards. Steadied my aircraft, nosed in. Pressed the gun-button. Hundred yards range. Got her this time. She went down, disappearing in the clouds once more. I didn’t even bother to chase her. I turned for home. I had gone only a little way when I heard the bark of the cannon. Gosh, it gave me a real fright. This Jerry was some weasel. How did she avoid my fire like that? Anyway, I was taking no chances this time. I climbed quickly and swung down, diving for her tail, giving her everything I had. She gave a roll and went down in a drunken spin. That’s fixed you, baby, I thought.

“Thank God for that, too. I only had two or three more bursts of ammunition left. But would you believe it, before I’d gone a mile I spotted her in another break in the clouds. I became hot. Was anything the matter with me? Had someone mucked up my gun-sights or put blanks in the guns? I aimed and fired rapidly. She disappeared as before. Had I got her? I flew around, hoping to God she wouldn’t show up again. I only had a few seconds’ burst left. But no! There she was! This time I went right up to her so that I could offer Hans a cigarette. For the *n*th time I pumped bullets into her, and for the *n*th time I saw her disappear in the clouds. It must have happened ten times at least, I thought.

“This time I didn’t mean to hang around. I had hardly a round left. Here goes, thought I, back to the nursery. I flew off like the dickens. Hardly gone a mile when whizz—bang. Her cannons! Boy, was I wild! This Me was a real devil. There was nothing for it. I had to take a last crack at her. This time—no mistakes! I swung up, looped, and with a terrific effort managed to get into a vertical dive. I saw her underneath and rolled over, sitting on her tail. She got within two hundred yards. A hundred. She was turning and weaving, but I hung on. I held my fire. Fifty yards. Still I waited. Make dead certain this time. There she was—so close I could have put salt on it. Crash! My last shells got her right where it hurt. I saw flames, black smoke. This was the end, all right. She turned over and began to drop.

“I followed her down all the way. I wasn’t letting her out of my sight this time. I hadn’t taken thirteen pots at her to see her get away now.

“I went down with her and a few yards farther off landed my

aircraft. I got out and went to have a look. What do you think I found? ”

“Your Messerschmitt,” said Wainwright.

“*Thirteen* Messerschmitts,” said Melville.

Even Stavenden joined in the laughter.

“Look here,” said Bill Farson, “I’ve had enough of this.” He ceremoniously drew out his revolver and laid it beside him on the table. “Now, Harry, what have you got? ”

“I—er—a pair of deuces.”

“No good. You, Joe? ”

“Two pairs. Kings up.”

“No good. You, Don? ”

“I? Oh, just a pair of queens.”

“No good. You, Pilsudski? ”

The Pole, who held a straight flush, threw up his hands in embarrassment. “I? I was only bluffing.” But he showed his hand.

Then there was a scuffle and they were called to order.

“I give up,” said Farson, and threw in his hand. He went across to where Stavenden was playing the piano and relaxed in an armchair.

Boy looked at the clock. Another hour—and release. Would this day pass without his baptism of fire? He looked at these unconcerned faces and felt his knees grow weak. Some of these men—men like Haines, Murray—were toughened in the hottest furnace. Both had been shot down twice and lived to fight again. He had seen Stavenden and Murray stunting over the airfield the other day, trying out the latest Spitfire, sweeping together ten feet above the ground, wing to wing, like a couple of dancing partners, and he was awed and upset by their immaculate judgment, their breath-taking skill. They had put the new machine through its paces, including a vertical dive that would normally crack the undercarriage and tear the wings to tatters, before agreeing that it was a worthy successor of the present machine.

Stavenden was a tall, impressive, sombre-eyed young man with high cheek-bones and fine hair swept back over a monumental brow. He was the enfant terrible of the squadron, perpetrated the most ingenious practical jokes on superior officers and got away with it, behaved in a fashion that won him a D.S.O. in France after a fortnight, was the author of some of the most fantastic and reckless escapades over the enemy lines, had tried to make the Pole fight a duel with him on continental lines,

offered prayers before every operational flight, and once escaped court martial very narrowly when, instead of reporting back to his base after an engagement with the enemy, he landed his machine in an open field and was found, an hour later, lying under a tree composing verse.

As he played, the Pole grew very uncomfortable, and suddenly Boy heard Murray say cuttingly, "Stop it, you bloody ass."

Stavenden gave a crackling laugh like an electrified wire fusing and stopped with a crash of chords.

"What's up?" asked Farson. "Why do you stop? It's quite a decent tune for once."

"Our comrade the Count has heard the Horst Wessel played at his country's funeral," said Murray, and to Stavenden: "When are you going to grow up, Rupert Brooke?"

"My dear Neil, democracy extends to the realm of music. We can say what we like, play what we like——"

"Dry up. You've got Pilsudski agitated and——"

"Oh, let him."

"No," said Murray slowly, "it's something that catches on."

"This one," said Haines, "is a boogie-woogie." He looked at Boy with some embarrassment. "Amusin', what! Boogie-woogie is the equivalent of our hey-nonnie-nonnie. What do you think, Hayward, old thing?"

"I say, Neil," said Farson, "have you seen this one?"

Murray examined the photograph. "Is she the one you showed me last Thursday?"

"Don't be silly."

"Why is her hair so grey?"

Farson blushed. "It isn't really. It's the way the dye comes out in the photograph. It looks a lovely auburn really."

"With love, as in art and wine, it's the quality that counts," said Stavenden. "Why do you go for quantity all the time, Bill?"

"Maybe I'm sex-starved, see," said Farson.

"I wonder why photographs are always confined to the face," said Stavenden. "For instance, I'm sure that the outstanding charm of this young lady lies in an entirely different part of her anatomy."

"See," said Farson. "You may pretend to be highbrow, but really you feel the same way as I do, pal."

"In love, as in art," said Stavenden thoughtfully, "it's the quality that counts." He played a few chords. "I think I've got something there, Neil. Did I tell you about my new essay

on democracy? It's a transcription of the Socratean dialogue in formal verse, and has the same theme. It's the quality that counts. Why should we allow ourselves to be ruled by the majority when the minority invariably know far better what is best for society. Take the simplest everyday illustration: on a bus do we ever ask the passengers to vote when the driver should put the brakes on? No, the majority would get its ruddy neck broken if it wanted to have authority over the driver."

"The German word for bus driver is fuehrer," said Murray.

"An appeal to the patriotic instinct is a poor answer to logic," said Stavenden.

"That," said Farson, "sounds like a crack against the country. No cracks against the country, see. I won't have anyone saying a mucking word against my mucking country, see."

"Why do you love your country so much, Bill?" said Stavenden. "What has it ever done for you? Conscripted you to fight for freedom, driven your old man into some colonial jungle where he had nothing but the Union Jack to protect him from malaria and cannibals. I suppose when he waved the Union Jack in the face of the bacilli they saluted and fell dead. And after the war, when you come back to the land fit for heroes you'll peddle motor-cars for the benefit of tykes who got millions in war profits."

"It's just because I love my country that I put up with so much from her, see," said Farson.

A silence settled on the company, a silence dedicated to quiet, personal reflection; something that Wainwright said about giant redwood forests in his home in Canada, touched them all in different yet similar ways, a new atmosphere pervaded the room. Even the card-players spoke in whispers. Stavenden played softly, and Haines and Boy smoked quietly. Murray was writing a letter, and as Boy watched him he found he liked the way he smoothed the paper with a quiet, firm movement, the steady way he wrote. It was a lovely summer day and he felt very languid in his kit. Boy looked about the large room with its big windows, the friendly small writing-tables, the book-shelves whose titles he knew by heart now, the bronze plaque on which was inscribed an eagle and a dove sharing the same nest—a gift from a sentimental Indian race-horse proprietor who had contributed large sums to the Spitfire Fund—and souvenirs and mascots and the like that adorned the mantelpiece. He was so new to it all, and yet he seemed to have already spent a lifetime in this room. He looked at the clock. Only another half-hour yet—and then he would be

relieved. Every time he thought of it he felt the same shock, the same relief and regret. He had passed all his tests and exams; they were severe and his training had been thorough, but the real thing would be so different. Would he remember everything? How would he feel when he saw the enemy? Could he master his fear, look on it as some stiff test, an extension of his training? Or would he lose control? How little one knew of oneself. He wished he could talk to someone about it. Farson. . . . He would be sympathetic in a way, but he was different, Boy felt. Farson loved fighting; he had practically no imagination. To him it was a dangerous sport like hunting or mountaineering. Stavenden. . . . He could not talk to him. Stavenden derived some neurotic stimulation from danger, his recklessness was a form of intoxication, mortal struggle awoke strange terror within him that made him over-emphasize his courage, made him fling himself into the fight with the ardour of a weak character who, drawn by the fascination of terror to the edge of a precipice, takes the fatal step in a moment of self-contempt at his fear and longing for something beyond petty mortal things; something that seemed to suggest the infinite seduced and paralysed him and he abandoned himself to danger with a greater courage than a man like Farson who was normally a far more courageous type; that accounted for his mad escapades, his extraordinary success in France. Murray. . . . Boy could not understand him and did not know him well enough yet to sum him up; he seemed in many ways the most mature person in the squadron, speaking little and commanding attention always; there was about him an air of too intense quiet, of great strength held in severe control; he might prove to be a man of dangerous temper, but it seemed that his self-discipline was very great, too; he made Boy feel uneasy and intrigued. Then Ross Haines, a fastidious young man of very personable charm, easy-going, with sleepy blue eyes and the quiet confidence of a man who took his superiority so much for granted that he was unconscious of it; he had confided in Boy that he simply hadn't the faintest idea that he would make a good soldier, that he had planned—in as far as he ever planned anything—to leave his father's business as soon as he inherited his legacy at the age of twenty-five and devote his life to yachting in the Pacific. He believed that the British Empire was on the decline and he wanted to surround himself with all the best 'degenerate' art, collect and become absorbed in Western European painting, literature and music, sail his yacht and fish all day to throw back into the water what he had caught

by the end of the evening. If the British Empire was to decline, he intended it to decline with charm. He was rather surprised that when he flew an eight-gun Spitfire he felt an entirely different person, the weapon he held gave him a sense of masterfulness that made him defeat with complete adequacy opponents who seemed obsessed with the spirit of the new world. He was quite astonished. It was to Bill Farson that Boy turned; Farson who was a robust, hard-hitting, hard-hating, hard-loving, poker-playing youngster of twenty-four, ferocious in action, slow to take offence, basically extremely sentimental, of narrow outlook—he would cry at the death of his favourite dog—very good-natured, yet dour and plucky to the highest degree.

Boy listened with half an ear to Stavenden's devastating attack on his most cherished beliefs.

"My dear Bill, you say you believe in democracy, but of course you worship the Royal Family, accept the ruling of the House of Lords over the Commons' decisions, feel flattered if members of the nobility link arms with you. You believe in democracy, because, after all, the Ritz Hotel is open to everyone. You believe in tolerance, so you tolerate the Glasgow slums, unemployment, poverty and prostitution with great fortitude."

Farson yawned voluminously. "What about it? I believe there are faults in my country, just as I've got faults myself. Is that any reason for running myself down? Maybe you'd like me to fight myself. You talk like a bloody fool, Steve. If I didn't know you were okay I'd believe you were working for Moscow."

"Who says I'm a Bolshevik?" said Stavenden. "I'm no Bolshy. Those boys were just beginners; I believe in scrapping homo sapiens entirely. That experiment has been a flop; we ought to make way for spiders who feed on the blood of their victims and destroy their males after fornicating with them. That's real degeneracy for you."

"Aw, shut up," said Farson, and closed his eyes wearily.

Murray said with gloomy amusement, "The trouble with Steve is that he is such an intellectual snob that he is contemptuous of anything that he can understand, and the trouble with Bill is that he is contemptuous of anything he can't."

Melville said to Boy, "By the way, Hayward, what can you do at the concert?"

"I? Nothing."

"Can't you entertain? Know any conjuring tricks?"

"No."

Wainwright said, "Show Hayward some of your conjuring tricks, Mel."

"No, no, I've got to have the right atmosphere."

"Go on," said Wilkes, "do that one where the chicken comes out of the egg."

"No. Besides, Hayward would be bored."

"Not at all. I'm most anxious to see it done. A chicken from an egg?"

"You're just being polite, old man."

"No, really."

"Well, if you insist. Lend me your cap, will you?"

Boy hunted for it and handed it to him. Even the card-players stopped their game to watch. Melville put the forage-cap gently on the table and, from his pocket, he extracted an egg. He carefully broke it and poured the contents into the cap.

"Well?" said Boy.

"Just a minute. Don't talk. Just watch. Now—Eldoradabra! Hey, presto!"

"Well?" said Boy.

"You mustn't talk, Hayward. You'll see the egg transformed into a chicken in a few moments. Älanebraska! Hey!"

"Well?" said Boy.

"That's funny. It should have worked. Probably it was because you interrupted. Broke the spell. I'll try once again. Alabama, eldorado, abracadabra! Hey!"

"Well?"

Melville shook his head. "Doesn't work. I should have told you it sometimes doesn't. Never mind. Have you got another cap handy?"

"No, I haven't."

"Hm. Then I can't show it to you, after all."

"Afraid not."

"Well, that's that, then. Sorry about the hat, old man."

"That's quite all right, old chap."

"Well, that's very decent of you, Hayward. You're a sport. Not all fellers would be so sporting if they got their hats ruined."

"My hat. Oh, I see. But this isn't my hat. I couldn't find mine for the moment, so I gave you someone else's," said Boy innocently.

Melville started. "What! Someone else's! Who's?"

"I don't know, really. I found it on your desk."

The discomfited Melville went scarlet at the laughter that rang out.

A little later Boy started his letter for the third time that afternoon. Before writing half a dozen lines he stole another look at the clock. His time was almost up, less than a quarter of an hour. Suddenly he felt very weak. He wouldn't be able to hold out any longer. He closed his eyes and began to think a prayer. 'Don't let them come. Please don't let them come. Not now. I waited and waited. I steeled myself. I can't stand it any longer. I haven't any more courage left, God. Please don't let them come now. Make it to-morrow, please, God.'

"There!" said Ross Haines. "Wasn't that delightful, Hayward old thing? I used to play it on my pater's yacht. I remember one jolly summer night near Monte. We had a very decent crowd on board, too. Two charming Italian fellahs, a Frenchman, a painter chappie and the minister for fine arts."

"I'm afraid I wasn't listening very closely."

"Do pay attention, old boy. It's a lovely record. Bach's Air on a G string. As I was saying, we listened to it: Italians, French, English, Czech and what have you. And as the boat rocked she seemed to entangle the stars in her sail. Wonder what on earth's happened to them all now."

A few moments later he said, "Whom are you writing?"

"My sister."

"Got a photo of her? Oh, charming! What colour eyes?"

"Blue."

"Delightful. Give her my love, old thing."

"What do you know about this, fellers," said Wilkes. He gave a shocked laugh. "I send my little kid a railway train for a present, and now he writes me that he wants another so's he can have a collision. What a bloodthirsty little devil! You know, it scares me—a small child like that."

"Now look here, Bob, there's no need to worry. It's not dangerous a bit. Really. I know what you've been thinking. It's been written all over your face. I tell you there's practically no danger, so snap out of it. Ask Mel if you don't believe me. Mel, Bob's wife is going to have an operation for tonsillitis. Tell him what a minor thing that is."

"I don't know if it will appeal to you," said Haines, "but some of the chaps are joining me one week-end. There's fishing and a little shooting. What do you say, Hayward?"

"Thanks. Sounds grand."

"And dancing in the evening. I suggest you bring your sister."

Farson pricked up his ears. "Did you say huntin', Ross?"

"You keep out of it, you bloodhound."

"What's this sister of yours like, Hayward? Got a ph——"

"All right," said Boy with a resigned gesture. "Here you are."

"My, my. What colour——"

"Her eyes are blue, roses are red, grass is green and so are you."

So it went on. Hour after hour had stolen by in this ever-deepening atmosphere of intimacy when word and look seemed no longer necessary to convey thoughts, when one learned to sense a comrade's fleeting emotion, when any strong feeling of one seemed to pervade the whole room and depress or exalt, invoke memories, disturb, or hearten. The human animal is sensitively attuned to the mood of its fellows, and after a time, in some purely ineffable way, something of the spirit of the strongest would steal over the whole company and encourage it. These young men, so different in many ways, yet had a certain common denominator of character, resolution produced either from aggression, ardour, sense of inferiority or extravagance of temperament. On the whole there was a high standard of those qualities that ennoble the species, and these made this close proximity for hour upon hour every day tolerable when with a more inferior type under the same circumstances of suspense would have proved an irritant that would sap morale and prey upon companionship till human relations became impossible. Boy did not have to look about him to sense the calm in the faces of the young men, to know the reserves of courage that not only made companionship tolerable, but lifted it to a higher plane of purpose and fortitude, so that they seemed, each of them, to draw from a common source of courage as a singer in a chorus feels that he has the strength of the whole chorus in his voice. Death itself—if Boy could believe in death, which he could not—would be sweet in such company. An inexplicable agitation came over him. For a moment he felt strong, ready to face anything. If only they would call upon him now—now whilst this moment gave him strength.

Yet in a minute the feeling passed and once more he felt the remorseless pressure at the back of his brain, the weakness, the restlessness. If someone dropped a book from a table or scraped a chair he felt as though he would scream.

Worst of all was this restlessness for which, for a long time, he could not account. Then he realized that he was full of vain regrets for things left undone, for books unread, for hopes de-

ferred. A wild fancy came to him about how he would have lived his life had he known he would die at twenty-two. What futility there had been in his life, how foolish all his caution, his study, his pedestrian observance of convention. It seemed that he had never taken a risk in his life. The fantastic thoughts flashed past and he entered a new phase of overwrought excitement. He thought of the chances. They were evens each time. The thought terrified him, and for the first time he was really in a panic. But it lasted only a moment. To die. Face it. Stare at it. Examine it. It seemed impossible. Death? He could not believe in it.

Evens. Evens. Evens. Figures do not lie. Young men get killed just as easily from a cannon-shell as the old. Evens. Was there no way out now? Did anyone ever refuse to go up? Could anyone? Could they force him to go up, force him to take control of the aircraft and fly it, guide his hands, imprison him in the machine? No! He looked out of the windows and the delicate summer sky maddened him. What a complete ass he was to have volunteered for this job, how infantile it seemed, this braggadocio. He closed his eyes wearily. He could not look at the clock.

The alarm-bell sounded, electrifying everyone into sudden attention.

Murray picked up the phone and said, "Murray here, sir."

He listened quietly and then rang off.

"All right, boys. Just a couple of fighter-bombers inconveniencing our shipping. Come on, Bill."

Farson rubbed the sleep out of his eyes.

"I'll need two more. Wainwright!"

"Oh, tahell. And I've got a full house."

Murray hesitated a moment, then caught Boy's eye.

"You too, Hayward."

"Yes, sir."

They hurried out towards the waiting machines.

Although it was only a few yards Boy felt out of breath.

"Hayward," said Murray, falling into step beside him.

"Yes, sir?"

"Stick to me and follow general tactics. You'll guard my rear."

"I'd rather like a go at them myself."

"Don't worry about that, you'll have plenty of time for that."

"Very well, sir."

"What have you got in your hand?"

"Nothing, sir. Only something my sister gave me."

"What is it, a lucky charm? Here, give it to me."

They had stopped beside their aircraft. Murray took the mascot and handed it to one of the mechanics standing nearby.

"Now look here, Hayward. There's no luck in this job. It's a matter of science and training. You've got a better machine and have had a better training. I won't say 'Don't feel afraid,' because everybody feels afraid at first. But don't worry. You'll come through all right."

Boy nodded dumbly.

"It won't be as difficult as your flying tests," said Murray finally, and clapped him on the shoulder. "Hop in and follow instructions carefully."

3

A FEW seconds after he was strapped into the cockpit Boy felt a peculiar cold calm. He heard the shouts of the mechanics and looked about him. Murray's machine was already taking off along its concrete runway, there followed the faintest of explosions as Farson's machine awoke to life and the deep note of the airscrew added to Murray's, a moment later Wainwright's thundered into life. Automatically his hand went to the starter. Four swelling, thunderous notes rising one on another faded the shouts of the mechanics and ground-staff into insignificance. A stiff wind now where there had been calm, the earth rushing and then tilting away, tree-tops sloping, the aerodrome looming, growing larger, then smaller, the sky enveloping them. They formed a V spearhead, Murray ahead, setting the pace, Farson guarding the left flank, Wainwright the other, Boy the rear. He could only judge the speed in relation to the wind-current, but they seemed to be going at about half-pressure, the engines ticking over; even so the speed was high.

Boy tuned in on the radio telephone and heard Murray: "Are you air-borne, red four? Get in closer, you're trailing behind. We're going to climb to ceiling. Stukas and fighters over Thames estuary. The other was a diversion raid. Squadron will join us in a minute or two."

A few minutes later: "Remember your instructions *re* Stukas, red four. Attack plan B7. Keep your eyes skinned, we're still climbing. Answer."

"Plan B7. Still climbing."

Farson's voice came over: "How many Stukas this time, Neil?"

"Six or seven. Four Me's 109. Nothing to worry about. Red two, answer. Plan B7."

Wainwright's voice: "Jawohl, Herr Kapitan. Plan Beta Sieben."

"Consider yourself launched," says the duchess, swiping him with a beer-bottle," said Farson. "I only hope the Northern Com don't get these birds before we get there."

"Red four! Don't ruddy well ram me! Wake up, D'Artagnan!"

"Sorry," said Boy.

"Hallelujah, I'm a bum. Hallelujah, bum to you," sang Farson.

For a minute or so there was silence, then Murray said quite naturally, "Red four, listen. These Stukas are rats. They've got sharp teeth, but when you get them by the back of the neck they're helpless. Understand? Answer."

"Attack from above."

"Right. Here we go."

Farson said, "I spy with my little eye. No. Wrong. A skylark."

They were flying high over London now, and Boy could see the Thames and London Bridge, the Houses of Parliament stretching below just like a picture post card. The illimitable blue sky with its aura of golden haze was reflected and transmuted into a whitish flame on his airscrew. His polished dashboard with its innumerable instruments gave him a sense of reality, as long as he had something to do with his hands, something to occupy his mind, he was all right. It had always been like that.

Suddenly he heard Farson's excited shout, "Jam session!"

He looked down, for a moment seeing nothing, then, some thousands of feet below, he saw a dark fat shape, like a flying bug, diving slowly.

"All right, red two. Your pigeon."

There was an excited roar, then Farson swung away from formation and dropped into a steep dive, disappearing rapidly.

Boy hadn't a moment to get his bearings when Wainwright shouted something and pointed downwards. This time Boy could see nothing.

"All right, red three. Nurse him along."

Without further ado Murray swung away in a sharp left turn, dropping like a stone.

"Keep your eyes skinned, red four," said Wainwright. "We just passed a Schmitt down below. There aren't any flies at this height."

He began to circle slowly. Boy followed. He seemed to have suddenly lost his power to breathe. All his actions had to be thought out as though he were learning to walk all over again. His straps felt too tight.

"Nurse him along," Murray had said, and Boy felt ashamed, although everyone knew that that was perfectly natural. He looked down carefully, but could see nothing for a time. Murray's machine grew into a small grey speck in the distance. What was happening? He could see nothing, hear nothing. There was a tiny puff of smoke in the sky. That was a shell-burst. Funny, it looked so peaceful, like a tiny cloud and very pretty. He was up in the gods all right, watching. How enormous London looked, and how helpless; its very vastness gave it an air of forlorn humility; that its millions of quiet peoples, its sleepy, giant life should depend on these little wasps in the mighty sky, fighting for its safety, seemed laughable. How peaceful everything seemed: the Thames, broad and majestic with its dirty little smoke-stained, quiet-chugging boats; the familiar historic buildings, bathed in the mellow haze of the noon sun. Far below there was a sudden faint explosion and then—out of nothing—a sheet of greenish-red fire, falling, falling, to disappear instantly in the Thames, which rolled on placidly.

"What was that?"

"One of the bombers got smacked in the kidneys. Bill, I think."

They climbed and circled, climbed and circled, all the time keeping a watchful eye. After a while they saw a grey speck advancing, and Boy felt his mouth become so dry that he had to swallow. But it was Murray returning. He took the lead once more and they set off for the Channel.

"They've been chased off by the Northern Com," he said. "I shared a Schmitt with a Hurricane. Hardly got a bite. There might be something doing along the coast. Climbing to ceiling. Answer."

A few minutes later they saw the coast line and Boy might have been looking at one of the model large-scale maps. They

were going at a moderate cruising speed, and a few moments later Farson rejoined them.

"A JU, Neil. Must have got his bomb rack because he went off like a burst balloon. There's nothing like hitting them in the artillery. Nemesis, that's what it is."

Murray called Boy. "Listen, red four, you're going to lose your virginity in a minute. There's an attack taking place over shipping off the Channel. A single raider. Remember B7. When I bank, take the lead."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Where was this? He could see nothing. The sound of the engines kept changing in the wind-current, high and low, high and low, it kept buzzing in his head. When he put on the ear-phones Murray's voice crackled and sounded explosive. He felt the sun beating down through his helmet and his feet were cold, his hands did not obey him instantaneously; he did everything with an effort. Thought registered and then he had to make his hands do things as though they were independent from the rest of him. He nursed the stick in hot fingers.

"All right, D'Artagnan. Here we go." Murray went off into a spinning dive and Boy urged his machine to the front. But Farson and Wainwright drew very close on either side. They were obviously 'nursing' him.

Boy saw now. There it was, a large Dornier, a long sooty form like a cigar slipping along smoothly five thousand feet below. He pushed the stick forward and his machine nosed downwards. He began to feed the engine and the wind beat like a heavy tide, flapping flap-flap.

"You're taking her too hard, D'Artagnan. Level out and circle. She's spotted you."

Boy saw the big bomber begin to swerve and glide away. It grew much larger suddenly and he got upset. She kept getting out of range of the gun-sights. Murray's voice stiffened him. He pulled out of the dive hurriedly and then banked. The bomber looked like abandoning its prey, a big tanker on the port-side, and was looking up. Boy did not feel the wind smite his face as he went swinging in rapidly. For a moment he thought he had got it in his gun-sights and pressed the gun-button. It was the first time! There it was—the eight guns roaring, making the whole machine strain and quiver. It gave him a start.

"Wait for it, red four. You fired too soon."

The bomber turned easily with a languid rolling movement and shot away, gliding imperiously as a queen. Suddenly there came

a heavy barking roar and Boy heard the shells whine past. He did not know what to do. He had forgotten about the rear gunner. He jerked the stick to the right—too hard, and his machine began to heel over drunkenly.

“Red four! Ease your stick.”

Boy had got into a spin. For a moment he did not know what was happening. Then he realized he had the stick fixed in a nerveless grip. The bomber was firing all round him now and he heard the weird high song of the shells, the sullen rattle of motor-cannon. There was the smell of cordite from his gun and he felt giddy. He could not hear Murray's voice for a while. The green-grey sea rose up, towered, stood up like a wall of pounding lava and began to turn and turn.

“Ease your perishing stick!”

He bit his lip and his hand weakly moved the stick to the left as gently as he could and then slowly drew it back and the sea vanished.

“Wh-where is she?” he gasped.

“Heading for home, red four. Pursue and engage her.”

Boy wished he knew what was happening when suddenly he found the bomber again. She had slipped past him suddenly, knowing it useless to evade a four-cornered attack. She was trapped and knew which was the weakest corner.

“Go on, Sonnie,” cried Farson, “hit her in the balkans.”

Boy suddenly felt fierce. His fear heightened his savagery. “You big bloody s——!” he said to himself, almost on the point of tears as the bomber, with matchless timing, came snaking in, avoiding his gun-sights and synchronizing its fire perfectly at each turn. Why did they leave it to him? Why did they hold their fire? He felt the shells whistle past, the breath of death on his face. Then for just a brief moment he thought he had her trapped in his sights, and hurriedly pressed the gun-button. A three seconds' burst, but he had mistimed. He pulled the stick back and headed up, opening the engine wide. He got into a racing climb, looped and swung in for a rapid dive attack. He was too hasty. Had lost the bomber.

No, there she was. But above him for all that. He felt as gauche as though he had trod on his partner's toe in a dance, but this was no dance. He seemed to think everybody in the world must be laughing at him.

Suddenly he felt a shadow on his back, and with a deep whining roar Bill Farson swept over him and leaped into a tremendous attack. Boy heard the jargon of the guns and saw the bomber

turn quickly. There was a long trickle of flame on its fuselage. Again that whining roar, rising and rising and then dying down in a deep bass, the shrill savage stutter of the machine-guns and the bomber turned again drunkenly. Again, shrill and vicious, came that cry from the engine, and the bullets bit into the tough hide of the fuselage. The bomber turned like a scalded cat with Farson and Boy sitting on its tail. No weaving and banking now; she was making for home in a bee-line, her rear gunner returning fire furiously.

Something about Farson's presence calmed Boy, invigorated him. He seemed to make the bomber behave; to him she had been like a savage animal that had got out of control. His comrade had whipped and tamed her. Now Boy could have his revenge, revenge for the humility he had suffered; it had played with him like a cat with a mouse, now the mouse would assert itself. He opened his engine full out and left Bill behind. He did not know why the other lagged, did not press home the attack. The bomber's rear gunner had been 'silenced' and Boy seemed to be able to have it all his own way. There she was—flying low and losing height, and Boy closed in. She was within a thousand feet and drawing in closer all the time.

"Hold fire! Hold your fire, you mug," he heard Murray say.

But this was absurd. He was within a hundred yards and she was sitting in his gun-sights. This was his moment. He pressed the gun-button. He felt the aircraft strain as the guns woke like lions.

There was a tremendous thudding roar and for a second or two his aircraft stalled. He felt as though his head had been plunged into a sack of masonry.

When he came to he could not see the bomber anywhere.

"Wh-where is she?"

"Where do you think she is, you half-wit. You blew up her aerial torpedoes. Lucky you didn't blow yourself up with her." Murray went on with severity to lecture him on firing at close range on a heavily laden bomber, but Boy did not feel any sting in the words. He had got his first kill. True, it was only half a kill, but he could now feel that he had earned his wings. He could not understand the power of his feelings. It was wonderful. He felt so fine he was a little ashamed of himself. Something that Murray had said jokingly came back to him, about losing his virginity. He remembered how he felt after he had fulfilled his manhood; it was a wonderful secret that he had nursed for a long time. It was like that. A few minutes ago he had been a

mere child to be nursed along, now he was a fully fledged soldier who had killed a man, probably several men with one blow. If he could not create life, at least he had power to destroy it; he was stronger than life; he was a genius, a sort of god. The extremity of his feelings were a revelation to him of his secret desires. He had thought that this would be a 'job' well worth doing, but unpleasant, uncivilized, a beastly bore and a waste of time, a necessary evil. It was utterly different from that; it gave him a sense of power he had never known before, a place amongst men; it was sweet.

Suddenly the feeling went. He felt at peace and very exhausted. His hands trembled. Poor old Hans, poor old Fritz. Poor Hans' mother, poor Hans' wife, poor Hans' brother. Still, they should complain. They had asked for it. Who wanted a fight anyway?

*"It's the wrong way to tickle Mary,
It's the wrong way to——"*

sang Bill Farson.

"Close in, red four. We're returning to base."

Boy did not listen to anyone any more. All he wanted to do was to get these straps off and have a nice hot cup of tea; it would be heaven. His windscreen was dusty and glared with the sun, the smell of cordite gave him a funny feeling in the throat and made him cough.

"Red four, are you all right? You keep lagging behind."

Boy closed in. He felt weak.

"Are you all right, red four?"

"I feel fine. I'm going to do a slow roll when I get back."

A line of verse came to him for some unaccountable reason. It haunted him, he could not get it out of his mind.

"To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow——"

"I'm going to make me a Mint Julep," said Wainwright in his Canadian brogue.

"A light ale for me," said Bill Farson. "What will you have, Sonnie?"

"I'll have one and an ersatz cigar."

It would be nice to get out of this flying kit, relax in an arm-chair and nurse a drink in his hands. He had twenty-four hours' leave when he came off duty and it seemed like a lifetime. He

never knew how precious time was. How he used to waste it in the old days. What would he do? Go home. . . . No, that was a bit tame. He thought he'd like to see Helen. That would be nice. He thought of her pretty, pouting mouth which she knew how to take advantage of. He laughed to himself at the thought of her words, "I'll find out. Daddy is very strict." Charming! Still, somehow he felt he wanted something else. Fond as he was of Helen, she was not quite right to his mood. He wanted to have a really good time with someone who was a sport; go on the loose; he wanted to meet someone entirely new, exciting, awakened. . . . He wondered if Murray or Farson would like to go up to town with him. He was one of *them* now. Have fun. To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow. . . .

He pulled back his head-phones and the chime of the engines rose and fell, rose and fell. G . . . A . . . G . . . A . . . G . . . A . . . How pretty was the river in the sunlight now. Soon they would be over London again. Those toy steamers, those picture-post-card fields and cottages, those manikins or pygmies and Lilliputian horses. Green grass, blue skies, silver river, trees bending elegantly, white lights sparkling on his airscrew. G . . . A . . . A . . . A . . . rising and rising, a violin note.

For a time he forgot the sound of the engines, did not notice a new note creeping into them, merging with a full resonance. In a few minutes he would be back at the base. Every time he thought of what he had done he felt a slight shock of pride and delight, mixed with shame. To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow. . . . He was grateful to the others for 'nursing' him along. If Farson hadn't helped him, Murray hadn't guided him out of his flat spin, anything might have happened. Poor Hans. G . . . A . . . Poor Fritz. G . . . A . . .

Murray was making some gesture to him. He put on his head-phones.

"Red four, answer."

"Red four."

"How are you feeling? "

"Fine."

"Good. Listen carefully. We've got company. Look on your port-side. Take it easy."

Boy looked down.

It was some time before he could make out what Murray had indicated, and when he did he refused to believe his eyes. It seemed that this trick played on him by fate was so incredibly bitter and mocking that he refused to accept it as true. He had

been prepared for a stern initiation, but that he should be plunged into a furnace was too horrible.

Immediately he was agitated by the question: What would they do? What *could* they do?

There was a stabbing pain at the base of his heart that made it difficult for him to breathe; icy tremors passed through him in waves. He had never known what fear meant till now. Only once before when cycling as a boy he had slid helplessly into a tramline in front of a lorry, felt his machine out of control and the piercing shock under his heart as though a needle had been injected. But the feeling was over in a second. Now the feeling persisted moment by moment, dragging like eternity, whilst the air began to resound with the imperturbable drumming of the enemy columns.

But he still refused to believe it. What *could* they do? No, no, it would be madness. They could not do it. Holy Mother, why did this have to happen to him? Why couldn't they have come later when he was a little more prepared? Why did they have to come to-day, when he felt weak and naked? *But what would they do?*

Boy glanced down.

"Holy smoke!" yelled Farson. "Full dress show! Look at them!"

"It's come at last," said Wainwright. "How many are there?"

"One—two—three—squadrons, bombers. One—two—fighters, I think. Neil?"

"There's another layer just below. They're well escorted."

"How many altogether?"

"Near enough eighty aircraft. Big boys, too. Look at those Dorniers! My Christ, what are they up to? Where the bloody hell do they think they are! Warsaw!"

"Independence day, Prague," said Wainwright.

"May day in Moscow," said Murray.

"They're heading for London all right."

"Single line formation," said Murray, "and start climbing."

In a few seconds they lined up and began a racing climb, Murray on the extreme right, then Farson, then Wainwright, Boy last.

The enemy were nearly three miles below. They were flying in close formation, two squadrons of fighters, then immediately below three squadrons of bombers, below that another squadron of fighters to complete the sandwich. The sky re-echoed with

the reverberation of the engines, the air quivered, the earth was a sounding-board that threw up to the vault of the sky the deep droning thunder.

"Okay," said Murray, "I've just got through to the Fighter Command. We'll have some squadrons here in a couple of shakes. Red four!"

"Yes, sir."

"You will proceed to join your squadron."

Boy said nothing.

"Red two."

"Okay, Neil."

"Red three."

"Okay."

"Red two, give me about ten seconds and then join me down there."

"Right."

"Red three. Give two ten seconds."

"Right."

For a short time they flew in silence, watching the German machines intently. Suddenly Murray's voice broke harshly, intense with hatred: "Look at the effing esses! White tie and tails! Start counting!"

He turned his stick sharply and his machine went into a screaming left bank, then swung into a power dive. They watched him flash down like a thunderbolt, then grow smaller, smaller. They heard a high stutter, saw a bright necklace of flame.

"There goes one of them," said Wainwright. "There goes two . . ."

"Four—five—six——" said Farson, his eye on his watch.

"He's broken up formation. Look at them!"

The power dive had come as a complete surprise and the laconic ranks of the aircraft were broken up temporarily. A squadron was entirely dispersed. Murray's well-directed fire had brought down two machines, and now he was being chased by a flight of three Messerschmitts whilst the fighter formations rallied and began to re-assemble.

At that moment Farson banked and turned his machine down in a long vertical dive right in the centre of the leading squadron of fighters. Once again the machine-guns began to roar, and Boy saw an enemy machine catch fire even before Farson had pulled out of his dive. The formation of eighty had been broken up to sixty-six when Murray had dived. Farson's attack broke

up the leading squadron and reduced it to forty-eight. Now it was Wainwright's turn.

"Good luck, Harry," said Boy quietly.

"You rejoin squadron, Hayward."

They were his last words. His long dive finished up in a head-on collision with a bomber. The roar of the high explosives made Boy's machine tremble five thousand feet up. It brought havoc to a squadron of bombers, who were completely dispersed. Only thirty-six machines continued to fly in formation; the others were scattered about the sky, engaged in desperate searches of an unseen enemy, confusedly trying to contact their squadron leaders, engaged in futile cross-talks, agitated orders and counter-orders. But thirty-six machines, including twenty-four bombers, were roaring towards their targets.

Boy pushed his stick to the left, then slowly down. He turned his machine into a projectile. In a few seconds the needle on the dial was flashing past the four hundred mark, creeping on steadily towards five hundred miles an hour. The wind screamed about him, flattened him down into his cockpit, tightened round his windpipe in a strangle-hold. He had his eyes fixed on the leader of the fighter squadron. The machine loomed towards him until he could clearly see the red swastika markings. For a moment he had it nailed in his gun-sights. He pressed the button and his machine shook, its lean body trembled like a young girl in his arms.

"Down went M'Ginty," he whispered, and shouted against the wind a moment later as the leader of the squadron plunged recklessly out of control, to crash in flames a few seconds later.

The speed of his dive made his aircraft flash through the formation of bombers. He managed to pull out of the dive by an effort of sheer will-power because the blood was being forced up to his eyes and nose and his heart seemed to have stopped beating. How he managed to get through the bomber formation without accident he did not know; it was a chance in a thousand. But when he began to climb again he could not see a single formation left, although the sky was dotted about with enemy aircraft.

But there was no time for sight-seeing. The enemy were on his track. As he began to climb he heard the whine of shells. A Messerschmitt closed in, firing rapidly. He touched the stick instinctively and went up into a swift climb. He thought that all hell was loose about him. Enemy planes flashed by, crossed and

recrossed his path a dozen times. He applied pressure on his engine to its fullest capacity.

What were they up to? Why couldn't they bring him down? It seemed incredible that with all these machines to beat off one of them could not pin him down. For the first time he realized how vast was the sky, how a touch of his fingers propelled him in any direction at a speed that baffled calculation. This fresh wonder came to him before he had time to recover from his original triumph in bringing down the squadron-leader in his surprise dive attack. How simple it had been. He had merely carried out instructions to the letter. He had aimed his machine like a gun, increased speed, dived, waited till he was within three hundred yards before firing. . . . He was amazed; there it was—he had put his coin in the slot and out came a box of matches! And he had been afraid . . . so afraid!

He had just time to see a formation re-form to be broken up again by Farson or Murray, when he saw an enemy machine flash downwards to meet him. He turned the stick up and met it almost nose to nose, pressing his gun-button. He saw pieces fly from it. He turned quickly to give chase. The enemy machine looped, and Boy turned to cut it off, trying to rake it with cross-fire. He fired just a little too soon, but some of the bullets damaged the wing. He turned and the enemy machine turned. Once more Boy heard the rattle of the motor cannon and he pushed his stick down, and in a moment the Messerschmitt was sitting on his tail. He swore, swung his stick quickly to the right and then left, then up. He presented a continuously weaving target. Another enemy machine was growing larger on the horizon. He felt a strange exhilaration. His power dive and successful onslaught on the leader had been a far more delicate operation, very nicely timed. He felt capable of anything at that moment. Although his nerves were on edge, although there was a throbbing pressure in his temples, his faculties were pitched to the finest degree, his eye saw the situation in a flash, his arm muscles twitched with nervous energy and his hands were as sensitive on the controls as a fiddler on his instrument.

He swung his machine deftly towards the enemy machine and once more turned it into a projectile. He saw the Me grow larger, ominous. Suddenly he saw it flinch, turn like a hamstrung horse. It was a moment of supreme revelation. Boy had discovered that his foe was as afraid of him as he was of his foe. But—and that was the test, that was the crucial factor—his foe could not control his fear. Boy could. This knowledge was the

turning-point; he was psychologically predisposed to take the offensive, knowing that his enemy would flinch, cower. Courage fed on the other's fear; the bold move must intimidate. This simple and profound lesson of warfare learned at the expense of nerves and will, burnt indelibly into his consciousness, decided him, made him suddenly master of his feelings. *Why, he's afraid of me!*

Boy suddenly felt a wave of confidence so triumphant that he shouted. He was afraid, was he? But he wanted this war, didn't he? Was he afraid at Guernica when they had human flesh and blood as defence? Were they afraid in Warsaw, in Rotterdam where they paraded slowly in formation, dropping sheets of bombs on women and children and old men. They weren't afraid then. Then, you bastards, what are you afraid of now?

He could not understand his feelings. His heart beat with excitement, he set his teeth to prevent himself from shouting afresh. He was conscious of an ecstasy of confidence. At that moment energy, power intoxicated him. He seemed to feel the strength of his eight-gun flashing machine at the tips of his fingers; he felt he could wield it like a sword, dealing lightning burning thrusts, parrying with exquisite timing and delicacy any counter-stroke, driving it home again and again into the black body of the enemy. Fire and steel poured like a blizzard, he controlled lightning with a pressure of the finger; he could wheel in the sky as though he could turn the earth on its axis. He pushed a little stick and the earth and the sky revolved like a top, he pressed a button and let loose the whirlwind.

In a moment the feeling began to wane, and whilst he fought his way out, dodging and feinting through the circling foe, he could hear the roar of fresh fighters and felt the presence of other machines.

The blue and white circle! A British fighter squadron flashed down to engage the enemy, and the re-forming German formations suffered another rapid dispersal. In less than half a minute there was another fighter squadron in full cry, and the enemy's hopes of a concerted attack on the aerodromes were finally crushed.

Meanwhile Boy was in a dog-fight with two Messerschmitts, one of which was severely damaged. He was sitting tight on the latter's tail, quite calm, knowing that one last burst would see it through. But he had to reckon with its accomplice who, in turn, stole up behind him. When he heard the rattle of the motor cannon he hesitated a moment whether to finish off his man or

turn to meet the new danger. He decided to deal with the more dangerous one.

He looped, and at the top of his run he did a quick roll and shot off in the opposite direction from his original flight, quickly firing as the enemy plane crossed his path. He swung in to meet it, aiming his machine inexorably, threatening a head-on collision. He threw discretion to the winds. Let the other get out of his way. He was solely intent on registering him in his gun-sights. That moment came, and Boy saw his fire rip the wing like paper.

"That's for Warsaw," he muttered, and a moment later as he saw his converging fire bite into the fuselage, "and that's for Rotterdam, you sweinhund." He saw the enemy turn away from another threatened onslaught and closed in rapidly.

He gave chase. That Messerschmitt knew how to run all right. Boy chased him over a couple of towns, over half a dozen villages and five or six tributaries of the Thames, hills and valleys, bridges and farms, before he got within striking distance. The moving target, twisting, weaving, feinting, climbing, falling, ducking, was drawing nearer . . . nearer. . . . A quarter of a mile now. Three hundred yards. . . . Two. . . . Boy waited no longer. He pressed the gun-button and the Me was withered up in a long fiery burst. He saw it flare up and gently fall, silenced.

Boy shut off his engine and watched it fall into the river. The flames kissed the water, sighed and died. A charred mass floated a moment or two, then sank.

Boy pushed back his helmet. The sky all round him was full of peace and summer sunshine. He examined his petrol gauge. He could do nothing more this trip.

A. . . . A. . . . A. . . .

His head was still buzzing with the sound of the guns, the drone of enemy aircraft. . . . He thought of the kills he had made on this first trip. . . . He thought of Harry Wainwright who had grumbled that he had to leave the game when he held a full house. . . . He would never see those redwood forests in his home in Canada again. . . . That, after all, was the hardest part of the business. Still, at least three of these heroes would never be in action over Guernica again. He felt weak and deliciously at peace.

As he glanced at his companion Boy Hayward wondered if he, too, cut such a figure in his sky-blue uniform. Murray walked slowly and Boy kept step with him. He saw the looks people gave him—reserved, friendly, envious or proud—but rarely indifferent. Eyes automatically rested a moment on the wings sewn on his chest. It was a pleasant enough feeling. He supposed that in time he would get as accustomed to it as his companion, who strolled deep in thought.

Boy wondered if these thoughts made conversation unwelcome, and therefore said nothing until Murray spoke.

“Let’s have something to eat,” said his companion at length. Without looking to right or left he strolled across the road. A taxi braked sharply.

The driver leant out. “All right, chum. Wake up. You’re on the ruddy floor now.”

Boy laughed and apologized on behalf of his comrade.

Murray said nothing, ignoring the driver entirely.

They entered a small restaurant in Leicester Square and took a table near the window.

It was a piping hot day, the unaccustomed weight of his uniform made Boy feel languid. There were a lot of girls in summer dresses fluttering about them like butterfly wings, some of them very pretty.

“What shall we have?”

“To drink? Oh, beer for me.”

It was a pleasant light sort of place with cane armchairs and Chinese prints on the walls, fresh-cut flowers stood in vases on each table, and the water in the carafes sparkled. Boy kept on thinking of Richmond cafés, walks in the park and along the river. He felt very hot, very fit and glad to be alive. Twenty-four hours leave! He would crowd everything he could into it, snatch at everything, miss nothing. He wished one moment they had gone to Richmond, the next he wanted to be in an inviting looking pub across the road; he kept looking at the girls who sat chatting and laughing at the table opposite, making up his mind about one, then deciding that he would have preferred another—the one with the red flower in her hair. It was a delicious problem. Then he forgot about it when the beer came and he felt its sharp bitter-sweet taste. After drinking he felt a cool glow, and he looked at his glass with pleasure, noticing what a fine colour was the amber.

"What shall we eat?"

"Oh, everything."

"All right," said Murray, and turned to the waiter. "We'll have a sole."

"Yes, sir."

"And then a steak minute."

"I'm sorry, sir. In that case you can't have the sole."

"But I'd rather fancy sole."

"In that case you can't have the steak."

"I see. Well, then, I'll have fresh fruit and some cheese to follow."

"In that case you can't have steak or sole, sir."

"How I wish," said Murray with a tight smile, "we were in the good old days when fish used to be thrown back into the sea."

Boy thought the steak was delicious. They hardly exchanged a word throughout the meal, but Boy was glad of his company, which did not require conversation. Every now and then he looked at a girl in a flowered silk frock—the one with the red flower in her hair had since lost favour through a rather high-pitched ringing laugh. It was clear that the girls were ripe for picking. All that was required was a ready tongue and a little courage. Boy had had a certain amount of experience of that sort of thing, but this was London, the centre of sophistication, and one had to watch one's step.

Without looking up from his plate Murray said, "I'm sure it's very difficult. Shall I suggest they mount a platform?"

"What do you mean?" asked Boy in embarrassment.

"Or perhaps parade slowly past our table. But probably that's not necessary—with those X-ray eyes you no doubt miss nothing."

Boy flushed. "I think one of them's caught my eye, anyway."

Murray poured out a glass of cold water for him and pushed it across.

But Boy's enthusiasm was proof against even Murray's sledgehammer irony. A few minutes later he definitely caught one girl's eye and, although immediately after she looked down, she could not restrain a smile. She was a robust adolescent girl with a ribbon in her pale gold hair and not a very good complexion, being hardly more than a schoolgirl, but Boy's pulse fluttered.

"I say, have a look," he said to Murray. "Is she really smiling or am I dreaming?"

He got up slowly and walked up to their table.

"Hallo," he said. "Do I look as funny as all that?"

Two of the girls began to giggle and the other two looked down their noses.

He addressed the giggling girls. "I say," he said confidentially, "can one of you girls do me a great favour? I know it's very rude to speak to you, but really it's most important."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," said one of the giggling girls.

"It's like this," said Boy, leaning confidentially over the table. "My friend and I have made a bet about you girls. I maintained that you were from the ballet at the Prince of Wales. He says you're waitresses from a Kensington tea-shop taking an afternoon off."

"Oh, what cheek!" said one of the girls—the one with the red flower, who didn't seem so bad after all.

"How much was the bet for?"

"Five pounds."

"What a lot of money to bet," said the girl with the ribbon.

"Not where you are concerned," said Boy. He pulled up a chair.

"I don't believe a word you're saying," said one of the girls who had been particularly appreciative after he had chatted with them about five minutes.

"You've kissed the blarney stone, you have," said another.

"It's given me a taste for that sort of thing," said Boy. "Come on, girls, what'll it be? Sherry, port? My friend will pay."

"What's the matter with your friend? Is he shy?" said the girl with the ribbon.

"Not really," said Boy, "but one has to be very careful with him. You see, he's a Balkan count. His name is Schrczvicznic. He used to rule over a lot of Croats. If you want to please him you must give him his national salute, which is like this."

Boy protruded his lower lip and rolled his eyes three times.

"Go on," said one of the girls incredulously.

"You roll your eyes three times if you're a male and twice if you're a female. It's a sign of respect."

"Why is he in the R.A.F.?"

"Oh, he escaped when his country was invaded by the Nazis."

"Does he speak English?" asked the girl with the ribbon, who was extremely intrigued by Murray.

"Oh, yes. Far better than I do. All educated foreigners do."

"Is he a good flyer?"

"He's an ace."

"A real ace? Oh, how wonderful."

"Why doesn't he come over?" asked the girl with the red flower.

"I'll call him if you like. Talk loudly to him as he's rather deaf." Boy turned to Murray and shouted, "Schrczvicznic!"

Murray rose reluctantly and came over to their table.

"What's the matter? Got a cold?" he asked Boy.

Boy said, "Meet my friends. What did you say your names were?"

"Gladys," said the girl with the ribbon. "How do you do, Mr. Schrczquicz." She protruded her lower lip and rolled her eyes twice. Then, recollecting the count's malady, said in a very loud voice, "My name is Gladys!"

"And my name is Doris!" shouted the girl with the red flower. She, too, rolled her eyes and protruded her lower lip.

The other girls looked up, shy and tongue-tied, but loyally supporting their friends by respectfully saluting the count in a similar fashion.

"I think," said one of the girls, "that it's wonderful to be an ace." As Murray said nothing she shouted, "I said I think it is wonderful to be an ace! Ace! You know, air fighter! Bang, bang!"

"We've never met an ace before," shouted the girl with the ribbon. "I think it's perfectly splendid all that air fighting! I once saw a fight from the roof of my office! It was stunning!"

"Gorgeous! Those lovely silvery machines—look like shooting stars! They're a perfect dream!"

"We girls really owe you a vote of thanks," said the girl with the ribbon.

"Why don't you send it to Hitler; he started it all," said Murray.

Boy kicked him under the table.

"What does he mean?" asked the girl with the ribbon. "Did I say anything wrong?"

"No, that's all right." He turned to Murray and said loudly, "Haven't you forgotten your phone call, old man?"

"No. I'll have to ring up now. You come along, too. I'm sure the colonel will want to give his regards to you, too."

"Excuse us, ladies, the exigencies of the service."

As soon as they were alone in the cloak-room Boy turned to Murray. "Now, look here, old man, which one would you like? I don't want to influence you in any way, but if you fancy the girl with the ribbon it's all right with me."

"Just a moment, Hayward," began Murray.

Boy said, "That doesn't mean I want her. I just wanted to suggest that if you'd rather have her I'm satisfied. On the other hand, if you like the one with the red flower I'm satisfied, too. Up to you entirely, old man."

Murray looked at him meditatively a moment.

"What's the matter?" asked Boy.

Murray said, "Look here, Hayward, try to get wise to yourself."

"Well . . . what? Take it that I am."

"In that case don't you see these school kids aren't any good?"

Boy said nothing.

"I thought you wanted a bit of quiet and to stretch your legs in comfort. But the other's all right with me," said Murray.

"All right. I'm listening."

Murray looked at his watch. "It's early yet. Say we go somewhere for a drink. About twelve we'll go along to some place I know."

"All right."

They told the girls that the colonel had invited them to a staff supper, and a quarter of an hour later they went to have a drink. They had a few whiskies, and then Murray pushed Boy's glass away.

"What's the idea?"

Murray signed to the barman to get him another glass.

"You want to know what's happening, don't you?" said Murray.

"Look, I've drunk this stuff before."

Murray ignored him.

"Another Scotch," said Boy.

When it came Murray poured it into his glass.

"I don't know why I stand that," said Boy.

"How much money have you with you?"

"About twelve pounds."

"Give me ten."

"I'll be all right."

"Come on," said Murray impatiently.

Boy watched him put it away in an envelope, seal it, address it to the air station.

On the way to a news cinema they dropped in to a post office and sent it off. They saw a news commentary and one or two interest films, then a Mickey Mouse cartoon. Finally they saw a two-reeler about the R.A.F. which featured an air combat.

"So that's what it's like," said Boy.

"Scares you stiff, doesn't it?" said Murray.

When they left the cinema it was dark. It was a lovely soft night full of the drone of traffic and shadowy grey clouds, the smell of hot pavements and gasoline. They crossed Piccadilly Circus and strolled along in the direction of Jermyn Street. Murray stopped to light a cigarette.

"Just a moment," said Boy, and clutched at his arm. He urged him into a shop doorway.

"What's up?"

"No. . . . It isn't. I thought I saw someone I knew."

"Who?"

"One of my father's friends. He'd be sure to tell them at home."

"Well, why not?"

"Don't you see. . . . I'm supposed to be home on my first leave."

Murray looked at him hard. "Why did you promise if you didn't mean to go home?"

"Oh, stow it, Neil. They'd be hurt if I didn't."

"Better than for them to find out through some friend. That would make them look silly and feel far worse."

"I know . . . but they're hardly likely to find out."

"And at the same time you imagine that every face you see in the dark might be someone who could tell them."

Boy flushed. "I know . . . it's silly of me. I just took the easiest way. I hate to hurt their feelings."

Murray said nothing.

"Can you give me a light, honey?"

"Take the box."

"Like to come home with me, honey?"

"No, honey. No money. Or alternatively—no money, no honey."

"That's funny," said the girl. "How about your strong silent friend?" She looked at Boy.

Boy's throat was very dry. "I . . ." he began.

"He doesn't speak English. He gets paid in polski roubles, negotiable in Warsaw."

When she had gone Boy said, "Why make fun of these wretches?"

"Why, indeed. It's a serious profession, I always say."

"The poor kid has enough to put up with without being laughed at."

"You're right. Does that mean you don't want to go along, after all?" said Murray.

"I don't want to back out."

"Back out of what? Now, look here, let's get this straight. Was it I who was after a pick-up to-night?"

"Shut up, will you."

"Now then, don't do your shy stuff, Hayward. I know what you feel. You've won your wings—your spurs, so to speak—and you feel a man. That's all right. I don't mind. You don't have to pretend with me. Get straight with yourself. Of course, if you'd rather go off by yourself and do it with no one else knowing, hide your face and then come round in the morning and pretend you spent the evening reading in bed, run along."

"Don't be a bloody fool."

"Mind you, I'd respect you far more if you were honest with yourself. What I always say is that having done our duty in preventing the Nazis from violating our womenfolk, we deserve a little relaxation. What do you always say?"

"Go to hell."

"Do you want to come or not?"

Boy looked at him bitterly. Murray was quite impassive, watching him with his severe smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"I don't know," said Boy. "The way you put it—it's hideous."

"You've got my point then."

Boy lit a cigarette and watched the smoke dissolve in darkness.

"It's a beastly temptation, Neil, isn't it? I don't want to hurt anyone. But it's a beastly temptation. I've . . . never done it before. I feel awful—rotten and excited at the same time—as when I shot that German down, saw him begin to roast . . ."

"Don't try to justify it, Hayward. You know what you want. Come on then. I'll promise you you won't hate it so much the way I'll fix it. You don't know anything about it. You'll probably get hold of some tough woman who'll embitter the whole sex in your eyes. But I don't insist. If you'd rather not come with me go ahead on your own."

Boy threw away the cigarette, which had a dead taste. "All right."

They did not exchange another word as they walked down Jermyn Street. A turning off Murray stopped at what looked like a private house. They walked up some steps and rang the bell. A man in evening clothes pulled apart the black-out curtains a moment or two after opening the door.

"Good evening, Charles," said Murray.

"Why, if it isn't the ace. Come in, sir. This gentleman a friend of yours, I suppose. Well, glad to meet you."

Boy stepped into a discreet red-carpeted, blue-lit hallway.

"Would you gentlemen like a drink?"

"That's the idea."

They followed him past more curtains through a side-door to a very neat little cocktail lounge. There was a shiny bar framed by half a dozen shelves with bottles, siphons, cut-glass decanters; a large mirror in a mahogany frame reflected the little room, enhancing its size. There were red leather and chromium stools ranged at the bar, at which were seated some very smart-looking girls who outnumbered the men three to one. There were a few chromium and red leather tables and chairs widely dispersed and one or two curtained alcoves.

"What will it be?"

"I'll have a mint julep on a night like this, I think."

"Good choice. A mint julep. And you, sir?"

"I'll try one, too," said Boy.

The barman took the orders passed to him by the man called Charles. Murray and the man chatted on general topics a while, and then he bowed and left.

"Skol," said Boy.

"Skol," said Murray.

They sipped the fiery drink, their nostrils full of the mint. Boy kept on looking at Murray and then at the crowd at the far end of the bar. His companion had fallen into his habitual silence. Someone in the group caught Boy's attention.

"Take it easy, Hayward. Don't try to rush things. 'Remember, you're on the ruddy floor now.'"

Boy looked guilty and then grinned. "I was watching that girl in purple. She's wizard."

Suddenly Murray's hand shot out and caught the glass in Boy's hand.

"I thought so," he said quietly.

"What's up?"

"Don't touch that stuff. It's needled. It's three times as potent as whisky." He turned to the bar attendant. "Who told you to dope these drinks, George?"

"You're making a mistake, sir."

"Who told you?"

"Nobody. I swear."

"Okay, you drink it, George."

"I don't drink, sir."

"You'd better."

The bar attendant hesitantly took away the glasses. He looked uncertainly at Murray. Then he drank.

"You can give us a lime juice each, George."

"Yes, sir."

"And everything's on the house."

"But Mr. Charles——"

"You pay for it, then."

They took their lime juices to one of the alcoves and watched the crowd. It was a very flash party, the women were all smart, tallish, with streamlined figures, with some very original coiffures and make-up, including a special starlight blonde. The men were a mixed crowd, a motor salesman, an undergraduate, a pork sausage manufacturer. Drink revealed their inner traits; some were lugubrious, some sullen, some noisy.

"Were those drinks really needed?"

"I don't know. They sometimes do that when the party is a bit flat and they see some tight wads in the crowd. Sometimes one of the girls tips George to dope one of her victims."

Boy looked a trifle concerned.

"It's all right, they're not really deadly. They only make you drunk much quicker." A little later Murray said, "You wanted to go on the loose to-night, didn't you?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Well, you either want to or you don't."

"I know. But I don't think I like it."

"Shall we go?"

"Well, I'll make up my mind about it in time. It's nasty but fascinating."

Murray pointed out a girl he knew. She was known as Stephanie. She was about thirty, comfortably built, had pleasant brown eyes with tiny crows'-feet at the corners, chestnut hair, a contralto voice which rang pleasantly across the room.

"She's an interesting woman, Hayward. She belongs to the old school of courtesans who take a pride in their profession. She will tell you what an art her work is, what qualities it demands. Patience, consideration, tact, self-sacrifice, gaiety, wit, sympathy, a knowledge of psychology, anatomy, hygiene, beauty culture, apart from a broad general knowledge of the affairs that interest men in every walk of life—politics, soldiering, society, big business, law and the church. She is contemptuous of the common strumpet who has taken to the profession as a result of failure

at every other. She is an excellent judge of character, has more complete control over herself than a diplomat, can give you sound advice about your investments, can entertain you for an entire evening at will and make her departure before you yourself are aware of your desire for it. Personally she bores me stiff. She belongs to a type that has gone out when mass-production came into its own, including canned Hollywood glamour. Still, she is well worth consulting."

Murray caught the woman's eye and raised his glass to her. A minute or two later, having finished listening to the pork sausage manufacturer with sympathetic attention, she discreetly left him and approached their table.

She greeted Murray as though he were an old friend whose absence had been a matter of deep concern.

"My dear boy, you've deserted me. You've been unfaithful to me! How else can you explain these months without letting me hear a word from you."

"And you, Stephanie, have been faithful to me?"

"But of course! How can you ask such a question. You know I am always faithful to your memory!"

"Ah, yes, Stephanie, what a memory you have. It is a phenomenon. This is my friend, Philip. Philip Carson."

"I am delighted to meet you, Mr. Carson."

Murray had pulled up a chair for her and ordered brandy and soda.

"And you, Mr. Sinclair," she said to Murray, "are you still as interested in vital statistics?"

"Note that, Carson. The language of diplomacy! Vital statistics! My dear Stephanie, how often have I told you you should have studied for the bar. Still, we are not concerned with ourselves to-night, Stephanie. This is Mr. Carson's evening. I promised to show him some interesting aspects of life in London."

"A fascinating subject. Mr. Carson will make a good pupil, I think."

"Mr. Carson," said Murray, "is young and suffers in the way all youth suffers, Stephanie, from a sense of loneliness."

"You don't have to pretend to believe me, Mr. Carson," said the woman. "Let me take your hand and read your character and destiny. Will that amuse you?"

"Yes, it would."

She scrutinized the palm of his hand a moment intently, felt the joints of the fingers. Finally she said abruptly, "A most interesting hand. You have, I am glad to say, a long life before

you," and smiled with a warm, quick glance at his wings. "Affairs . . . you will change your profession after the war. I can see an active and responsible and highly useful occupation, which will be well paid, but not what the work will be worth. Still, you need not worry about money. You are not married and are on the brink of falling in love with an extraordinary woman. She is a good woman. She has been married before, I think. No . . . perhaps not. But she will be a woman of the world. You are physically very fit. You have not suffered from any serious illness since childhood, have you? "

"That is true."

"And I can see a host of virtues or qualities. You are clever, but your thoughts do not harass you as they do your friend, Mr. Sinclair, who is an exceptionally thoughtful man. This is a strong sensual hand and you have a very virile or passionate temperament which sometimes carries you away. That is a fault! You must beware of letting your feelings master you! "

"How right you are," said Boy, flushing.

She noticed his expression and quickly changed the subject.

"And now for the exceptional quality which will single you out amongst men. You have tremendous physical courage. By that I do not mean you are never afraid. You have a sensitive and imaginative nature, so that you are more often afraid than many others who are far less courageous. But you can easily master your fear, and there lies your great quality. You may not believe me, but nevertheless you will be gratified to hear that you will have a marvellous military career and will be officially rewarded with the highest honours."

Boy exchanged embarrassed glances with Murray, who grinned at his glass and helped himself to some salted almonds in a glass dish.

The woman then frowned slightly and became silent. "Just a moment. I can see something else in your hand. Something rather contradictory. It is not very clear, I'm afraid. . . ."

"Well, what is it?" asked Murray after a while.

She shook her head and sighed. "No, I cannot really tell. You have one weakness, though. . . . Let me see. . . . Yes, one weakness which will cause you a great deal of unhappiness. It is your acute sensitive, or shall we say romantic, character. You are far too kind-hearted. . . ."

"Bravo, Stephanie. Really, you have excelled yourself! One weakness—too kind-hearted! What delightful tact. How proud one is of this weakness. Go on! "

"You may laugh," she said, "but this is a very serious matter for Mr. Carson. I am inclined to think that this weakness will cost him all the unhappiness he will ever suffer. He is the type of person who will give his last penny to a worthless friend, someone whom he knows is worthless, who is exploiting him. He will hate himself for being so weak, but he will let it rule him. No, no, it is not a laughing matter." She frowned at Murray, who continued to laugh.

"And yet," she said after a while, "it is not exactly this sentimentality which is the root of the matter . . . it is something else. . . . There is some very contradictory trait in your character which is very difficult to place. Let me look more closely at your hand."

"Never mind his hand," said Murray rudely. "Enough of this mumbo-jumbo. I respect your knowledge of character, Stephanie. I know you understand human nature. But spare us this witchcraft. If you can see or sense something contradictory about Carson let's have it honest and above board."

She was not in the least put out. She wagged her finger at Murray and laughed. "You are a sceptic, Mr. Sinclair. You believe nothing that you can't see or touch. That is *your* great weakness."

"It is the only thing in myself that I take pride in, Stephanie."

"Very unwise."

"And what is the sum of it all, Stephanie? To revert to our original topic, from your estimate of Carson's character can you suggest a good solution for the loneliness that gnaws at his heart? I think that is the language of youth and palmistry."

The woman gave Boy a quizzical, shrewd and appraising glance that lasted less than three seconds.

"He's rather interested in that starlight blonde over in the corner," said Murray.

The woman nodded indifferently. "A nice girl, yes. But not really temperamentally suited to Mr. Carson."

Boy was a little disappointed. The girl Murray had referred to was svelt, startlingly pretty in a cool way, with an air of assurance that sat well on her elegant youthful person. He was about to say something when Murray silenced him with a look.

"I've no doubt you're right."

"There are some young persons whose appearance does not prepare you for a frigid nature that delights in dealing unsympathetically, even contemptuously with a boy's loneliness."

"That seems sound enough."

"I think you are a little disappointed, Mr. Carson," said the woman with a warm smile, "but don't take it to heart. There are lots of equally attractive girls who I think will find more in common with you than Jeannette. Let me bring one or two over to our table." She looked at Boy and then at Murray questioningly.

"Go ahead," said Murray.

As she left the lounge Boy turned to Murray a little nervously.

"Is she—reliable?" he asked at last.

"Don't be a chump, Hayward. You're not committed in any way. Personally I'd give her a chance if I were you. She knows all these women inside out."

Some little time later when she returned with two girls, Boy was more than satisfied in leaving the choice in her hands. Both of these girls were very attractive, carried themselves gracefully, were vividly well dressed and, through contrasting features, enhanced each other's charms. One was a tall, cool, yellow-haired girl dressed in black silk, with black net gauntlet gloves, black silk stockings with a silver cobra-clasp belt; her high cheek-bones, wide mouth and pencilled eyebrows gave her an expression of constant surprise. She spoke in a quick, pert, droll fashion, smiled challengingly and had a vitality of manner that ensured her constant interest. She was introduced to them as Paula.

The other girl was dressed in some white soft material that fitted her figure in such a way as to accentuate the deep contours of her bosom and hips. She had a magnificent mane of dark hair, enormous hazel eyes that were at once thoughtful and illumined, with a heavy-lidded somnolent gaze, and full well-cut lips that were deeply expressive. Her movements were wonderfully graceful, with that slow stateliness of a trim yacht borne majestically by a surging wind. Her skin was a golden-brown that made the eyes flash and accentuated the reddened petulant lips. She spoke in a quiet sibilant tone, a little hesitant and drawling, with a foreign accent. Her name was said to be Hilda.

Murray and Stephanie did most of the talking at first and Paula made one or two facetious sallies. The girls did not look at them very much, but touched up their hair, sipped at their drinks and looked idly about, conscious that they were being sized up.

Conversation was general and chiefly about the dearth of night life in London since the air raids began. The girls drank little and were polite, attentive and a trifle diffident. Stephanie did most of the talking on their behalf, teasing them in a rough friendly manner, and they listened to her jokes respectfully. It

was clear they were a little overawed by her. Boy found himself interested in the drawling, hesitant speech of the girl called Hilda. She said she was Hungarian. Her accent gave her a faintly exotic charm.

After a while Murray looked questioningly at Boy, who nodded.

"Haven't you forgotten your phone call, old man?"

"Why, what's the time? Lord, the colonel will be furious. You come along, too, Carson. The old man will want to give you his regards."

"You'll excuse us for a few minutes, ladies. Hey, waiter, repeat that round, will you?"

As soon as they were outside in the hallway Murray said, "Well, what do you think?"

"Look here, old man, as far as I'm concerned it doesn't matter. I don't really mind which one it is. They both——"

"Please yourself entirely," said Murray shortly.

"Well, I like the one they call Hilda."

"Then Hilda it will be."

Boy hesitated a moment.

"You leave everything to me, Hayward," said Murray quickly. "Get your girl to another table, and a bit later I'll slip the key to you. It will bear the number of the room. I'll settle all the business details with Stephanie."

"All right," said Boy with a slight catch of his breath. He could not meet Murray's amused glance. He was very grateful for his polished handling of the situation.

"Thanks. Where shall I meet you . . . later?"

"I'll be in the bar probably."

"You're not . . ."

"No."

Boy flushed. "This can't be much fun for you, Neil. I'm sorry. You must think me terribly green."

"We settled all that long ago. You go ahead."

As soon as they re-entered the cocktail lounge Boy said to Hilda, "How about having one at the bar? I'm sick of sitting down."

She got up without a word, giving him a half-smile.

"Excuse us," said Boy to Stephanie.

He forgot about Paula entirely. It was rather clumsily done. When they got to the bar he ordered champagne cocktails.

For some time he could think of nothing to say.

"Well, here's luck," said Hilda, raising her glass.

"Here's to you," said Boy, feeling rather a fool for not having a better toast at the tip of his tongue.

He wondered whether he should ask her if she had been in England long, how she liked it, but decided that everybody probably asked her the same thing. He felt tongue-tied.

"Have you been in the Air Force long?" she asked.

"Not very."

"How do you like it?"

"Oh, I rather like it. But I haven't really been long enough . . ."

"I suppose everybody asks you the same things?"

"Well, no. . . . Not everybody."

After a while he said, "Have you been to the films lately?"

"No."

"Dancing?"

"A little."

"I rather like Jimmy Feather's band, don't you? It has plenty of pep."

"Yes."

"By pep I mean rhythm. Not hot rhythm. Swing."

"Yes."

"But for hot rhythm I think Johnnie Lester's band takes some beating. I mean Johnnie Webster. Lester's band's better for symphonic stuff."

"I suppose it is."

"Is it Lester's I'm thinking of. . . . No, it is Webster's. It's the other way round. Webster's was for hot rhythm. Lester's is for—what did I say in the first place? I was right first time."

"I think you were."

Boy thought she must think him an awful fool, which was precisely what she did think. Something of her position came to Boy. Any girl in a decent normal position could walk out when she felt bored. He felt the injustice badly.

Murray came up to the bar and slipped the key into his hand whilst he was ordering some more drinks.

Boy's nerveless fingers could not get a proper grip on it and it slipped and fell to the floor.

"You dropped a bob," said Murray.

"Sorry . . . I . . ."

"Don't apologize."

He walked off. Boy picked up the key. The girl called Hilda pretended that she did not see it, but Boy was sure she had. Anyhow, he was grateful for her tact.

"You like dancing?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Do you often go?"

They went on talking like this, question and answer, he not knowing what he was saying, she not caring what he said, for about five minutes. All the time Boy looked down at her soft red mouth, saw the curving breasts tight-held in the low-cut dress. The thought of stripping off her clothes and possessing her made him feel a little faint, she was so ravishing, so new. He felt a master of fate, a Titan who held her beauty cupped in his hands.

But he did not know how to get to the point. There was a long awkward silence.

"Do you often go dancing?" he said finally. Then he recollected that he had said that before.

She gave him a quick steady look a moment, appraising and yet impersonal. Then she sighed, smiled and smothered a small yawn.

"Tired?" he whispered.

She nodded her head vigorously.

"Is there . . . can we . . . do you think there's . . ."

"Yes. Upstairs. On the second floor. Have you a key?"

Without waiting for his answer she took his hand. They left the cocktail lounge and went up the wide staircase, faintly lit with blue bulbs. The carpet was some indescribable shade of plum and purple.

"What number is it?" She took the key and found the right door.

For some reason he spoke in a whisper.

"You know . . . you're stunning . . . lovely . . . a lovely girl like you . . . I don't know. . . . I didn't know I could meet such a nice girl."

The room was small. It was painted cream and gold. A small electric fire burned in the grate. There was a marble mantelpiece with a noisy aluminium clock. An armchair stood beside the fireplace upholstered in yellow silk. There was a tall mirror opposite the low bed. The windows were small and heavily curtained with blue-black velvet. An inner door led to the bathroom.

As they came in she switched on the light, knowing exactly where it was. All the rooms were fitted out in the same way, furnished alike, with the same inner door to the same bathroom, with the same standard electric stove. It was such a small room that they seemed to fill it. The mirror gave back their reflections,

hers vivid, impersonal, indifferent—his awkward, excited, uneasy. She gave him the key.

He put his arms round her shoulders. She did nothing, merely let him. Her soft, smooth, naked shoulders quivered just a little at his hot touch.

“Do you want to lock the door?”

He went to the door and locked it.

“You look lovely, you know. . . . I had no idea . . .”

She took his hands and looked at them. He saw her lower lip tremble slightly and a frown on her face. She was thinking of something, he could see that. He felt a little uncomfortable. She caressed his hands. Then she looked at his face, searching it for something she wanted. She took his face in her hands and drew it towards her. She kissed his cheek lingeringly.

“Do you like me?” she asked.

“Of course,” he said, a little incredulous.

“I’m glad,” she said.

“Why?”

“I can’t tell you now.”

She lit a cigarette slowly, looking at him with that appraising glance from her large hazel eyes under their heavy lids.

“You know,” she said softly, “I’m going to try to please you . . . please you . . . utterly. Is that the right word?”

“I . . . yes, it sounds right to me,” he said with a faint grin.

“It’s—it’s nice of you to say th-that,” he added.

“Sit down beside me,” she said, and patted the bed.

When he sat down she took his hand and pressed it with such earnestness that his brain and lungs seemed to fill with fire. He fondled her shoulders and then put his arms round her, feeling her lean against him, her weight in his arms. Her hair smelt of some expensive bath soap commingled with its own human scent. He looked down her beyond the breasts to the profound curve of the hips. She drew a deep breath as she unfastened her gown and it fell away, making the breasts jut forth. She performed the rest of the operation with a sort of mechanical languor, moving slowly as a somnambulist. It was clear that she was devotedly pursuing every effort to please him. Further, she moved with such discretion and skill that the whole operation was performed in his arms. When the last garment was peeled off she looked at him earnestly again as though anxious for some sign of his pleasure.

There was no doubt about his reaction. He was an impressionable and almost totally inexperienced boy. And her body was sculptured with a grace that seemed to cry out for the act of love,

its depth of bosom and smallness of waist falling to the splendid arch of the hips, its gold-brown skin giving it a sleekness that accentuated the flex and ripple of muscle from shoulder to thigh.

To his astonishment Boy felt a tide of ineffable anxiety and pity. He was horrified at the thought that such a magnificent priceless gift as the body of a beautiful woman should be prostituted. But it was a passing sensation. All his sense of guilt was washed away as she took his hands and pressed them firmly to her so that he felt the beating of her heart, tremulous and pulsating, under his hand.

He whispered, "Why do you say you want so much to please me?" He laughed in a far-away voice. He had a deep disturbing sense of power. He felt at once a god and a beast. "Why do you say you want to please me?" he repeated as she made no answer. "Is it—love?"

She turned slowly to look at him. She shook her head. Her brow puckered a little as she began to speak in that hesitant, tentative fashion. "No . . . not love. But because of . . . what is the word? . . . hate. Yes, hate. Because of hate."

5

IT was some time before the perplexity of the mechanical reiteration of the word 'hate' became a vital question in his mind.

"Are you happy now?" she asked him.

"Yes, I suppose I am. . . ."

She did not say any more. He watched her put on her things with that languid indifference that reminded him of a somnambulist. He smoked, tasting nothing after the first few puffs. He mechanically took stock.

It had left him with a sense of melancholy, of futility. She had fulfilled her part of the bargain with honesty and willingness. But his mouth was dry, bitter as though he tasted ashes. It reminded him of a gloved handshake. Perhaps it had been his fault for having been too eager, too impetuous. Perhaps inexperience had made him lack control. He could not blame her entirely. Her indifference was outweighed by tolerance; she had spoken softly, her touch had been delicate and skilful. What more could he demand? But he had felt thwarted, his eagerness and tenderness were unsatisfied. Although he was physically appeased he now realized that that in itself was not

what he had wanted, after all. There was the ache of unsatisfied longing for affection, for the essential contact with her in spiritual accord which alone would give him the sense of possession of her beauty, her femininity.

He felt a fool. He was tired and unhappy.

Yes, he was disappointed. He had a sense of frustration. He had felt like a god and a beast, now he had a sense of insignificance, of weakness. Murray was right, blast his eyes.

He watched her put on her ultra smart, daring clothes. He smiled bitterly to himself. What a mockery! What a fraud! And yet it might have been even worse—she might have been hard in the way he had heard these women could be hard—have filled him with bitterness and contempt for his weakness, hatred for her (sex.)

Now she was smoothing down her dress in front of the mirror, touching up her dark fine hair, straightening her gown over her limbs. She turned round and examined herself. She was ready now.

He felt baffled. What an incredible waste! What a beauty she was, what youth in those sparkling magnificent hazel eyes, what untapped vitality and ardour in that fine body, what expressiveness in those slender white hands, what potential fire in those compact mobile lips.

He got up. "Don't go yet," he said. "Have a cigarette?"

"All right," she said. She looked about her. "Would you like some tea? There's an electric kettle and some things in the cupboard."

"Yes, I'd love some," he said.

"Don't smoke so much," she said. "You've been chain-smoking, you know. It is only nervousness and will make your mouth very dry."

This was the first friendly thing she had said, and he was exaggeratedly grateful.

He offered to help her make the tea, but she told him to sit by the little electric stove.

"You know," he said in a sentimental mood of confession, "this is the first time I have done this sort of thing."

She did not say anything.

"What I mean is . . . I wish I knew why you do this . . . it seems a terrible pity." He felt frightfully green after saying this.

She did not reply, but asked him whether he wanted sugar and milk.

The tea was too weak and sweet.

"I'm sorry," she said, smiling listlessly. "I have never learnt to make the English tea. I wish we had some coffee."

"It's very nice," he said loyally.

"You are very nice and polite," she said, smiling.

He frowned slightly. "Will you tell me what you meant . . . when you said it was out of hate that you wanted to please me?" he asked at last.

"It is a difficult thing to answer. You know nothing of me, you see," she said. She broke up polysyllabled words; it gave her a faint stammer that was intriguing.

"What must I know about you?"

"My brave young man, to understand you must know everything. My life, my upbringing, my friends . . . the things I used to think about . . . the things I learned. . . . It is too long a story. And it is too un-happy."

"Won't you tell me?"

His frown deepened. He knew it was what everyone asked her. He knew it was very unlikely she would tell him the truth. In a way he felt that if she told him he would somehow be nearer her, break down some of that apathy, that coldness that persisted in what was to have been an intimate relationship.

"Do tell me," he said warmly.

"Tell you? Oh, well!" She shrugged her shoulders. It was a gesture of hopelessness and resignation. "Are you like your friend Mr. Sin-clair, who is interested in vi-tal statis-tics?" she said.

"No, I am interested in you."

"But what is the good of telling you. You will be un-happy. You have come here to be gay, to meet pretty girls and make love."

"Really, I want to know more about you. You said something to me which is contradictory—that you want to please me out of hatred. What do you mean? It is not fair to make such a statement and leave me high and dry."

"High and dry?" she asked. "What is that expression?"

He tried to explain, and she suddenly understood. "Oh, yes." Then she said something to herself in German, which he understood was its equivalent.

"You said you are Hungarian. Do you speak German, too?"

"I am Austrian."

He nodded. "That's all right. I wouldn't have minded even were you German."

She smiled wanly. She got up and patted his shoulder. "Yes, you are a nice boy."

"Then you will tell me," he insisted.

She said nothing. He could not read her face. "You are very persistent." Then she gave a slight chuckling laugh. "I wonder if you will believe me, if I tell you," she said at last.

At length she began to speak. She began slowly in that hesitant way he had become accustomed to, sometimes stopping altogether as she searched for the right word or phrase. He helped her, discreetly interposing a word occasionally as he anticipated her meaning, in which case she would nod and smile her thanks. She spoke diffidently, almost impersonally, as though it had happened to someone else.

This was the story she told him: She was an Austrian, her parents were of Hungarian and Austrian origin. She had three brothers. She came from a middle-class home, the parents had inherited a rather large textile business. They led a comfortable, easy-going life; they were a liberal-minded family. The three brothers who were older than she dabbled in politics. As the only daughter and the youngest member of the family she was spoiled deplorably. She lived a protected life and was used to a great deal of adoration; all this rather turned her head, giving her a sense of pride and power over any male in their circle.

When the anschluss with Germany brought a tragedy to their family—the eldest brother had become publicly associated with a political party opposed to the Nazis—she was burning with indignation at the injustice they had to suffer. The textile factory was taken over by the Nazis, the eldest brother was imprisoned, the younger brothers whose activities were suspect could not get work.

The Nazis made the eldest brother a scapegoat and the excuse to strip the family of all their possessions. The parents were offered passports to leave Austria and, leaving their children little more than their blessing, went to live with some relations in Hungary as paying guests. The brothers undertook the protection of the sister, but were unable to fulfil the task as they were both conscripted within a few months. They gave the girl all that was left of the family fortunes, a few hundred marks and some family jewellery. For the first time in her nineteen years Hilda had to make her own way in the world.

The effect on her of this disturbance and tragedy in the family, after the protected life she had led, frightened her, but with that natural fear she had a sense of outrage at the injustice, particularly as it concerned her eldest brother who was now in a concentration camp. Her sheltered life and the adoration she had

had from three brothers gave her an idealistic view of life completely unsuited to dealing with reality. She had a great pride, a self-assurance—particularly in regard to her relations with men—in her bourgeois liberal milieu had she not been pampered, worshipped even by all her brothers' friends, was she not the envy of less attractive girls in her circle, did not men anticipate her every whim and fancy? She was hardly equipped—mentally or emotionally—for dealing with the new Nazi order. This she could not or would not realize. She took upon herself to champion her eldest brother's cause. She thought that if she appealed to the authorities she could win them by her pleas of justice, she had a great confidence in her personal powers of persuasion.

She saw innumerable officials, made herself a great nuisance, and her agitations amongst influential Austrians were indiscreet and foolish; she hardly realized how dangerous was her tilting at windmills. At length her money began to run very short. She heard from an old friend who had fled to England and was making a precarious living teaching music that she could get her a post as governess to the children of a well-to-do liberal family. There seemed no alternative. She could no longer rely on assistance from her family. On the other hand she was loath to leave her brother's cause undefended. She stayed on till her situation became desperate. At last she was forced to apply for a passport.

The official who saw her promised to look into her record. A day later two detectives called on her and asked her to accompany them. They said they wanted some information from her before giving her permission to leave the country.

She was taken to the offices of the political police. After waiting several hours, exhausted and panic-stricken, she was brought before a Gestapo official, who immediately began to thunder accusations of secret political work opposed to the New Order. Could she explain otherwise her attachment to her brother's cause? He interrogated her for an hour and a half until she did not know whether she was standing on her head or her feet. All the time his eyes ran over her figure in burning appraisal. After a time it was clear that the cross-examination ceased to become a political investigation. The police who had returned to her flat to make a thorough search reported that they could find nothing that could incriminate her. But her interlocutor was still not satisfied. Nothing short of a personal search would prove to him that she was innocent of subversive political work.

When the meaning of this became clear to her she protested

indignantly. Her old pride and youthful ardour were roused. She did not believe that they would dare to subject her to such a humiliation; she thought that by stamping her foot and flashing a look of contempt she would cow them as she could a young student whose advances she wanted to discourage. Needless to say it was of no avail. Within a few minutes she was stripped of every stitch of clothing.

Whilst her clothes were being examined she crouched in a corner of the room, her face like chalk, her hands trembling on her crossed knees. Then the official declared that there must be a final investigation.

"Open your mouth," ordered the official.

At first she did not understand. Did they expect her to practise the arts of espionage, carry secret documents on her person?

When she protested they seized her forcibly.

Suddenly all pretence vanished. She realized that it was a sham, an abuse of power in its most hideous form. Her interlocutor's face was like brass; in his eyes a single purpose was made naked. Her fury of indignation was reduced to pleas, to tears, finally to screams of sheer revulsion.

Apparently this final examination proved more than this susceptible investigator could bear. He could no longer contain his agitation, and the act of outrage committed in due course on her person was done "as a disciplinary measure in view of her political agitation directed against the honour of the Fatherland". However, when his ardour was quieted he seemed to feel certain remote twinges of conscience, because there was no longer any difficulties about her passport, and he pressed a fistful of paper money into her nerveless hand.

She left the offices of the political police in a state of complete physical and mental collapse. She had entered as a young woman full of the pride of maidenhood, burning with righteous indignation, a champion of justice, the product of nineteen years of sheltered liberal environment; she left with blood on her clothes, smudges of tears on her face, bruises on her body, her spirit completely broken, in complete moral collapse.

She was ill for several weeks. She was full of fevered fancies; she imagined there was poison in her blood, that her breath, her sputum were poisonous. But at last she recovered from this obsession. She was young, she had a healthy physique and could apply reason to her experience; she had all the powers of recovery of resilient youth. Slowly, painfully she recovered her will to live. This was the highest estimate of her recovery—the bare desire to

continue to exist. She was completely apathetic, she could not look anyone in the face, she had moods of such depression that a paralysis would grip her, her head would seem choked with ice, her heart would beat as though for release from her body.

She recovered sufficiently to take the journey to England, where she was allowed to stay provided she took employment as a domestic servant. She was taken into the home recommended by her friend, and in her work as governess for a large family of children she found an atmosphere of refuge which facilitated her fuller recovery. During that time she began to conquer some of her apathy; she could meet a person's eye without the nervous agitation and paralysis that followed. She no longer washed herself fifty or a hundred times daily, imagined her blood, perspiration, breath and so on were poisonous. The next phase of recovery was fairly well launched and she was beginning to take an interest in her future, beginning even to feel hope once again.

A little later she went to see a doctor about fits of sickness and giddiness. When she understood their meaning she was overwhelmed with fright and suffered afresh the nervous shock of the first days following the outrage committed on her. She was in such a state of agitation that she could plan nothing. Shame and fear prevented her from making an open confession of her condition to her employers and throwing herself on their mercy. She hoped the doctor might advise her about treatment for an abortion. He would not help her, and she went in desperation to her friend for assistance. She promised to make inquiries for her, but the cost of such an operation was prohibitive; her friend was as impecunious as she.

A little later the inevitable happened. Her employer summoned her to her room and cross-examined her about her condition. This lady was overwhelmed with moral shock that a girl in her condition should act as governess to her children. She refused to listen to any excuses. She accused her of the worst moral depravity, pointing out with fine indignation how she had abused the hospitality of an honest *English* home; she feared her presence amongst her children had undermined their moral fibre, she ordered her to pack and leave immediately. She gave her a week's money—thirty shillings. It was impossible to plead with this good woman, to attempt any explanation—she had been shocked to the core of her protective maternal instinct. Had she learned the truth she may have given the girl a month's money as a recognition of extenuating circumstances, but no more. She could not forgive Hilda for her presence amongst the innocent offspring.

Hilda was on the verge of taking her life. She sat for hours at a big London station drinking endless cups of coffee, trying to summon the will to throw herself under the lumbering wheels of the trains that thundered by continuously. But on the whole she recoiled from this solution, and, more to avoid the temptation than for any other reason, allowed herself to be picked up by some man who had been watching her behaviour for a long time. He listened to her story with a show of sympathy. It took him four hours to persuade her to accept his offer. He declared he was willing to pay for the operation if she allowed him to aggravate her condition.

The rest of her story needed no telling. How she had been taken up by one man after another until her position was regularized by the woman who was called Stephanie and who knew how to run her affairs in a way that gave her a home, protection from the police, health insurance and occasional holidays in the country, Boy could well imagine. As a matter of fact, she took frequent short holidays—sometimes three or four days, once even a week.

She stopped speaking. She gave him a nervous, quick glance.

"You should drink your tea. It is quite cold, I think."

"I don't want any."

"There! I know I should not have told you. I have made you quite un-happy. It was selfish of me."

"How could it be—selfish."

"Silly boy, you are not happy any more. If I am not un-happy what have you to be un-happy about?"

"You—happy!"

She gave him an incredulous look. She said softly, "Well, of course I am not. But I am . . ." She searched for the right word. "But I am gay! That is it, gay." She laughed and shrugged her shoulders. "Now you must go downstairs or your friend will think I have eaten you, eh?"

He got up. He thought she wanted to be rid of him.

"Hilda . . ."

"Yes?"

"I like you a lot. Could I see you again?"

"Of course. You can always phone me here." She gave him her number and the times when she would be available.

He asked her finally only one question. "How long . . ."

She looked at him whilst he tried to ask her in the most tactful manner.

"No, never mind. You must go," she said before he had time

to get the question out. "I would like to talk to you a long time, but I must not."

"But just this one question: How long have you been here?"

"Five and a half months."

He offered her a cigarette.

"Does that mean you want to stay and talk some more?"

"No, I'll go," he said, a little taken aback.

"You do understand?" she said, smiling politely.

"Yes, I don't want to detain you," he said, flushing.

She was about to take his cigarette when she found it was his last.

"No, it's all right, I'll get some more downstairs."

She shook her head determinedly.

"Good night. Auf wiedersehen."

"Auf wiedersehen," he said, still loath to go.

She saw it in every hesitant gesture.

"Oh!" she protested. "You must not tempt me to stay all night!"

She laughed, put her arms round his shoulders and kissed him full on the lips with warmth.

It was the only genuinely affectionate contact they had had, and it made him feel far more happy than the other thing.

Downstairs he found Murray drinking at the bar with Stephanie.

Nobody referred to his absence or to the girl. After a short while Murray finished his discussion with Stephanie, which was about a well-known French politician whom Stephanie had known intimately.

"You are showing off, Stephanie. You never knew him at all. Last time you told the same story about Lord Popham."

Stephanie shrugged her shoulders. "What of it? The Frenchman would have done the same thing had he a chance."

"You're an awful humbug, Stephanie, but I like you. Now I must take my friend home to bed. He is not used to the dance we led him to-night."

"Good night, Mr. Sinclair. Good night, Mr. Carson. Drop in again to see us one evening."

Murray and Boy got their caps and made their way through the maze of curtains into the blacked-out streets. It was still warm, but the sky was overcast and a very fine rain was falling; it was a warm, gentle rain that did not inconvenience them at all. They strolled slowly without speaking.

"Where are we going?"

"Back to the hotel."

"Feel tired?" asked Boy.

"And bored. You were a hell of a time."

Boy tried to say something, but Murray was not listening.

Their reflections glistened back palely by the dimmed lights. Boy wished he had a more easy companion with him, someone nearer him who would not be cold to his mood; on the other hand he was anxious to have Murray's opinion.

"I wish," began Boy, "I knew you better, Neil. You're a very hard person to know. It's most irritating sometimes."

They marched together in step, their feet echoing in the narrow streets off Piccadilly. There was hardly a soul in sight; one or two uniformed men, a shadowy taxi swishing by, jazz drooling out of a night club for a fragment of time as swing doors opened and shut. All the effects were fleeting, sable, all men silhouettes, even the snatch of jazz was some taunt, some yawn that petered out. Boy looked at Murray, who was wiping his rain-moistened face with a handkerchief.

"I can't make up my mind about you, Neil," he said at last. "What do you think of me?" he blurted challengingly.

"Have we got to have these confessionals, Hayward? It's too wet."

Murray gave him a sceptical look. He refused to encourage this self-pitying, romanticizing mood, which would lead to a mutual admiration competition and salve the boy's sense of guilt through his hang-over.

Boy's unhappiness increased. When they got to the hotel Murray insisted on going straight to bed. He would not even consider a last cigarette. They went up the lift in silence to their double-room, which had the merit that it was clean and large enough to swing a cat in. When Boy switched on the light it glared abominably on the standard furnishing; it had such an air of coldness, even of desolation—it looked so un-lived-in—that he temporarily lost his inclination to confide in someone.

Murray went into the bathroom. Ten minutes later he came out. He was in pyjamas.

"You'd better have a bath, too."

"I had one already at the place."

They got into bed, and Murray switched the light off from the cord suspended above them. Boy tried to settle down to sleep, but he felt completely awake. He wanted to smoke once more although his mouth was very dry, but he did not move in case Murray was going off to sleep.

He listened in the darkness. After a while he thought he could hear the heavier and more regular breathing of a sleeping person. He sighed and turned over in bed.

"Neil—are you asleep?"

"Not now."

"I'm sorry. Did I wake you?"

"All right. Get it off your chest. I suppose I'll have to listen."

"It's important."

"That means it's important for you."

"It's about what happened to-night."

"You're not going to tell me you're disappointed?"

"Well, I was. But it's something else. . . . I wanted to tell you something she told me. It's been on my mind."

Murray turned heavily in bed, unable to resist a groan of irritation.

"Listen, Neil. You must listen . . ."

"Go ahead."

Boy swallowed. As he talked he found himself becoming more and more excited. His voice rose so that when he listened to himself he was surprised at it. The blanket began to grow hot to him. He sat up, mechanically switching on the light. At last he got up and began to walk up and down. He put a cigarette in his mouth, but could not find a match. After a time he did not notice his cigarette was unlighted.

Throughout the story Murray made no comment. His face was unmoved. Every now and then he opened his eyes wearily to look at the glaring bulb that was badly screened in its cheap shade. But Boy knew he was listening.

Boy finished: "And the way she spoke, you know. She kept on stopping when she couldn't quite think of the word. Then I would fish for it and tell her. And she would smile and thank me and go on with the murder. I tell you, I couldn't stand it after a bit."

Murray said nothing.

"Do you think," said Boy, "she was telling me the truth?"

"Don't you wish it wasn't?"

"But these women do spin a lot of lies. . . ."

"Don't try to fool yourself, Hayward. You know she was telling the truth all right. It's incredible enough."

Boy knew he was right. No one could have invented that story about the 'investigation' in the offices of the political police.

Boy looked anxiously at Murray, who was deep in thought.

"It's a very interesting case," said Murray finally.

"Something else for your case-book?"

Murray nodded.

"Look here," said Boy with high indignation, "it's all very well for you to classify these things—what good will it do? This role of spectator is a hideous one. Either have the decency to do something about these things or leave them alone. I've heard them both refer to it to-night. The man who's interested in vital statistics. What a fraud!"

"What are you getting agitated about? What did you do to-night? Finish the job begun by that Gestapo agent in Vienna?"

Boy stopped short. His breath suddenly left him. The words were shattering; he felt as though he had been dealt a vicious blow at the back of his elbow, the nervous shock travelling throughout his body on waves of excruciating agony.

His teeth on edge, he stuttered, "What . . . do . . . you . . . mean?" He felt like killing Murray himself. . . . "You don't really mean that, Murray?" His voice faltered and he stopped.

"You asked for it," said Murray coldly.

He looked at Boy's flushed face curiously, then at the uniform slung over the back of the chair. What he said was perfectly true in principle: the man who had dedicated himself in service to oppose the vicious regime of the Nazis had that night contributed to a despicable crime begun by a Nazi. Helpless with passionate anger and misery Boy watched his cold eyes as they recorded this observation as another addition of 'vital statistics'.

"You carry these observations too far, Murray," he said brokenly. "You know, you must have stored away in that mind a positive little arsenal of human crime and misfortune. See that you don't get blown up by it one day."

"Good night," said Murray.

"Good night, Murray. Do you know the time, by the way? I can't find my watch anywhere."

"It's after two-thirty." He yawned. "Now that you've got that matter off your chest perhaps you'll find you can sleep."

"**T**HAT for Rotterdam," muttered Boy under his breath, "and that . . . for Warsaw. . ."

He watched his fire shrivel the thin armouring of the Me; pieces fly off. Suddenly it shuddered and burst into flames; its fuselage was ripped open and looked degutted, its entrails crushed. It went into a vertical dive and a black plume of smoke hung in the air a long time after it crashed.

"*That* for Guernica," he said as he heard the dull crash of metal against earth.

As soon as he returned to the base and landed his aircraft he heard the sirens again.

"Fill her up," he said, his eyes closed. "My oil gauge is low, too," he added as he examined the yellow oblong shape on the dial.

The ground-staff got to work in silence. He heard the click of shells.

"Excuse me, sir, your wing is riddled like a sieve."

"Ride lighter," said Boy.

He took the thermos flask of hot coffee and gin and drank deeply.

"Good luck, sir," whispered a young mechanic

A few moments later the deep pulsating roar of the engine rose, and his sun-warmed, hot-gunned, smoke-blackened aircraft rose to fresh toil and struggle, to join once more in battle, ride the wind and face the furnace.

"*That* . . . for Guernica!"

What is Guernica to you, or you to Guernica? Vienna is far closer in spirit. That night had made a mockery of Guernica and Warsaw and Rotterdam, of freedom, tolerance and democracy. He heard the whine of the engine as he banked, and the saluting sun smiting his eyes made him stare fixedly ahead as he castigated himself. The steady thrashing of the airscrew sang in broken rhythm with the changing wind-current 'freedom . . . tolerance . . .' He had finished the job begun by that Gestapo agent. Use all the catch-words, all the smooth and plausible justifications as you will, and wash the rest in blood, wash conscience and smother memory in blood. No, it did not make sense. His job was not here in the sky fighting young men fresh from school for the aggrandizement of power-and-glory megalomaniacs.

maniacs. He could not rest, could not find peace until he had washed out his act with some creative, some generous act that would restore the life of a woman in whose ruin he had been an accessory. How powerful and fiery was the ironic temper of life. He had to see the girl again. What he was going to do was not yet clear to him, but it would follow. He would see his next step then. But he had to see her, otherwise there would be no peace. He could face this battle of fire and steel with peace in his mind, but he could not face the other.

He still had a chance to see her. He remembered how, on the following day, he had missed his watch and recollected that he had left it in the bathroom in the club. He had called for it, and was given a note which she had left for him. He carried it with him. It read:

DEAR PHILIP CARSON,

You forgot to take your watch. I'm going to the country for a short holiday and am enclosing my address. If you write me where to send it I will return your watch to you.

Yours sincerely,

HILDA SOREL.

He had not written her yet. He did not know why he kept postponing the task. It was a valuable watch. He was not clear what he had unconsciously resolved to do.

He kept thinking of her. She had been so cold to him, so withdrawn . . . and that in the most intimate moment. How abominably she must have been hurt never again to be able to give herself honestly, warmly. She was young, she was beautiful, she had senses, organs, mind and soul, and she was on the rack; her life was over. Could this really be possible?

He had compared her with Helen and his sister when he saw them again at Helen's party. Dressed in their white summer frocks, smelling of bath-soap and eau-de-Cologne, their hair nicely brushed, his sister taking off her white gloves as she was handed a tiny Florentine tea-cup, a little plate with a paper doily and portion of almond cake. . . . Helen told not to be bashful, to play and sing, which she did. A very pretty song of Hugo Wolf. She sang it with feeling, dwelling on the tender passages, uttering a little sigh and closing her eyes on a melodic bar.

A big sun-filled room, the girls sitting in cane chairs by the window, which was filled with roses and chrysanthemums; Mr. Faversham in his neat grey suit and white collar that rubbed a

little scar on his pink thin neck, his gold-rimmed spectacles behind which his pale blue eyes glimmered benevolently, with pride at his daughter, at the young man in Air Force blue who was wooing her.

"You see," he had said, "we must hammer the invasion ports, I agree. But to my mind the essential thing is to give the Germans the sort of treatment they had handed out to other nations; bomb them until they squeal for mercy. I know they can't take it. You young men are doing a marvellous job, but with all due respects to you, I think a civilian understands these things in a different way. We can stand back from it all, get a different perspective, a long view of the matter, so to speak . . . see it as a whole." He popped a lump of sugar in his tea.

Helen pulled a face. She wanted to sing Bach's Ave Maria. She had been interrupted. Having asked her to perform, they might have the courtesy to attend.

At last Boy knew the factor that had established the vital difference between these girls and Hilda Sorel. It was the English Channel.

The train clanked out of the station, leaving him almost alone on the platform. There was no porter, ticket-collector to be seen as Boy strolled past the gate into the country road that ran parallel with the line. He passed along a steep bank carpeted with wild flowers that a soft wind combed sleepily. A few tall poplars bent elegantly in the breeze at the top of the road. The little town lay in a valley on the other side of the line. To the south were some lush meadows, the fat blue grass had a tinge of gold in the blaze of the noon sun. Beyond the meadows Boy saw an estate—an orchard, then a belt of woodland, then grassy terraces rising to a strip of fragrant flower-beds. A little beyond he saw a strange and pleasing effect, a small lake lay partly in the shadow of the wood, partly in the glare of the sun. It was blazing with silver flames where it was exposed to the sun and the other half lay cold and steely-grey, still and sombre under the spell of dark wood.

Boy looked beyond the rich fields with their blue-green sword-points of grass at the bowl of the sky with its fat, soft clouds like shell-bursts. He leaned against a wooden stile, plucked a few wild flowers and rubbed them so that the perfumed sap spilled over his hands. He breathed in the scent and the smell of the earth that clung to the roots.

A little beyond the estate there was another belt of woodland

with wild flowers sprinkled like brightly coloured studs at the foot of the gnarled trees. He took his bearings and decided to cross the wood. He walked slowly, the centuries-old grass yielding like velvet underfoot; a little stream ran through the wood, emerging brightly in a greenish-gold glade and breaking in steel spirals about some soft white boulders. He took the measure and jumped. He alighted on the rock, sprang to the next and then gained the other bank. It took him twenty minutes to walk through the wood as he stopped once or twice, first to admire an enormous oak with such a splendour of foliage that it was a minor forest in itself, another time he was held spell-bound by the faint echo of bells that for some strange reason he thought came from the heart of the wood. He had no time to investigate this phenomenon, deciding that his ears were playing tricks with him, that the bells must be church bells echoing amongst the cavernous oaks.

Once more in the white country road he strolled due east towards the cross-roads. He found the place at last, a small green-tiled straggling inn, with a cobblestone yard, a genuinely old-fashioned pub annexed to the clean white-stone building with wooden shutters flapping open from lead-paned windows. There was a lazy attempt to modernize the place; there was a tennis-court and a makeshift car park, but the low crumbling brick wall overgrown and infiltrated with thorny rose-bushes and dusted with brown earth was the key to the place.

Now that he had arrived he felt embarrassed about entering. As he thought of the excuses he would make for his visit they seemed to ring false. Why could he not have sent her an address to enable her to return the watch? The whole expedition was foolish. It had the air of an excuse to see her again. She might not welcome the idea, she might feel he was intruding. If she could not be free from men here . . . But it was foolish to hang around. She might see him from some window and note his hesitations, think him a fool. Either go in or go back to the station, he decided.

Then another thought occurred to him. He would merely leave a message for her to give the watch to the manager until he called for it. This would give the right air of a casual visit, something coincidental. Perhaps he would have a chance to see her without her knowing. He was curious to see her again. Plucking up courage he entered the little cool lounge.

There was a lot of brass work, antler's heads and plain old burnt oak benches and chairs. One or two men sat smoking and drink-

ing near the window. The place otherwise seemed deserted. He heard someone cough, and turning saw a middle-aged man in a tweed coat and slacks. For all this casualness of dress he was the manager.

"Have you a Miss Sorel staying here?"

"Yes. Do you want to see her?"

Boy was about to say he did not when the idea occurred to him that that would sound rather foolish. If he merely asked for his watch it might put her in a false position. Whilst he hesitated the manager called a boy and asked him to page Miss Sorel.

Boy asked for a beer, and the manager served him at the counter. His brogue was lazy and pleasant; he had a good-natured air and eyed Boy with sharp eyes that twinkled with amusement. Boy entered into a conversation with him. It was clear that the manager thought he was her sweetheart; he referred to Hilda by her first name; apparently she often stayed at the inn. Boy wondered if he knew anything about her, but in the end decided that that was unlikely.

The boy came back and said that Miss Sorel was not in. Boy could not resist a feeling of disappointment which was so acute that it surprised him.

"Yes, I was afraid she might be out. Often she goes for long walks and has lunch out. I haven't the least idea when she will be back, so I can't advise you to wait unless you can stay all day."

"Well, in any case, I'll have another beer with you."

The manager poured it out.

"This is good stuff," said Boy. "I suppose Miss Sorel is a habituée here."

"Yes, she came here first about six months ago and has stayed from time to time ever since. She seems to like it, though Lord knows why. It's very quiet and not the sort of place most young girls would choose for a holiday. Is she on the stage? The missus always says she is. But the old woman is full of these fancy ideas about actresses going off on holidays incognito, like royalty."

Boy laughed with him, but did not deny or confirm the rumour.

"You've got some nice walks round here. I like this sort of country."

"It grows on you, but there's nothing special here. Some people get attached to it. It's surprising. I can tell you what walks the young lady favours. You follow the field until you come to the little belt of woodland. Through there, along the stream until you come to the lake."

Boy thanked him, hesitated and then ordered another drink. But it was obvious the manager expected him to go along after the girl.

"If you don't see her who shall I say called?"

Boy toyed with his glass. "Tell her Philip Carson."

"Yes, all right, Mr. Carson. Is there any message?"

Boy realized that a request for the return of his watch might lend itself to a rather ambiguous interpretation.

"No, no message."

"All right, Mr. Carson."

Boy finished his drink and strolled out. There was nothing for it, he thought, as he found himself hesitating afresh. He would be foolish to come all this way, spend half a day and then still leave his plan unfulfilled. He came to get his watch and he would be a perfect fool if he went off without it. Which way did the fellow say she had gone? He followed the field until he came to the wood. It was a longish walk, and he kept a sharp look-out all the way. When he reached the little wood he spent half an hour or more looking around for her. Then he walked along the stream as far as the lake. He imagined she must be near there. It was an ideal picnicking place. He was surprised afresh at his disappointment when he drew a blank.

There was no doubt about it any longer. He felt thoroughly miserable. He kicked a twig viciously from his path. The delightful summer day, the pretty cameo-neat country suddenly seemed futile and mocking. Full of annoyance and with no ear or eye for his surroundings, he retraced his steps until he was out of the wood and he could see the town in the distance, by which he got his direction for the station. As he got out on the main road—which was the narrow country lane he had taken originally—he began to reproach himself for his weakness, his indecision, his failure to be honest with himself. He had wanted to see her again. Why, then, not admit the fact to himself; why shroud it in a number of excuses or justifications? Was he ashamed of his interest in her? How could that be—in view of the rage and pity he had felt for the injustice perpetrated on her? He picked up a cherry on the road.

He wished he had Murray's incisive logic, his ability to face the worst. But was it the worst? What did he mean when he said the worst? Did he still feel guilty about pitying this girl? Did he seriously attach moral stigma to her? Did he believe she was in any way responsible for what had happened to her? He picked up a cherry on the road.

Yes, in spite of it all there was an element of shame in his interest in her. It had been evident in his hedging replies to the inn manager, in his hesitations, his blushes, his sense of weakness. He found yet another cherry on the road.

And yet this was strange. He had spent so many restless hours at night thinking over what Murray had said to him in the hotel that night. He could not forget it. The stunning shock he had sustained when he realized that he had finished the work begun by that Nazi had made him genuinely unhappy. Of course he could not attach anything like an equal responsibility to himself, but he had to be honest and face it—he was—and people like himself were to blame for the life the girl led. What else could she do? How could she get a living? A foreign country which denied her the rights to make a living, her utter helplessness in a place where she had no friends, where she was at the mercy of events after the protected life she had led which did not fit her to overcome tremendous social odds. . . . Of course, this was known as the fate worse than death. But death . . . no, no, that was an excess of moral virtue. What had she to do with death? She was young; she had hardly lived; her ears could still hear music, she could see the green fields and smell the flowers that grew wild in the woods; she had vitality, beauty; her eyes shone with that freshness of vision that saw the world with insatiable interest, eagerness. . . . No, no. Not death. Never that! He felt tears of pity at the very thought of it. He felt a wave of pathos so acute that there was pain in his throat and his eyes. He stopped. His sense of anger for the brutality she had suffered, the victimization at the hands of obscene scoundrels, bordered almost on ferocity.

There seemed to be a lot of cherries on the road. He looked up. He saw her. She was walking ahead of him. She was dressed in a white sports costume, swinging her hat in her hand. There was no mistaking that superb head of dark fine hair, and he would have known her figure anywhere and that walk. . . . She carried a bag of cherries . . . that is, it had started off as a bag of cherries.

He grinned. He quickly began to pick up the cherries that marked her route as a trail. He came up behind her quietly, hiding them in his forage-cap.

For a moment or two he walked beside her. She did not look at him. Then he said, "Hallo."

She turned with exasperation. Suddenly the look became one of surprise and pleasure (yes, pleasure, he noted with gratitude).

"Why, it's——"

"Yes, Philip. Philip Carson. How are you, Hilda? You see, I remember your name."

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, that's all right," he said quickly. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing at all. Just walking."

"You didn't go by your usual walk this morning."

She looked surprised. He laughed. "Oh, it's all right. I went along to the inn. They told me all your peregrinations."

"Per—e—— No, no, that's too difficult."

They laughed.

"But what are you doing here?" she asked. Then she suddenly remembered. "Your watch! Of course. I have it for you at the inn. You'll come back with me?"

"Yes, of course."

They laughed. They both wanted to speak at once, then broke off, laughing once more.

"I thought of you," she said, "the other day. I heard the band of Jimmy Feather. I thought of you then."

He started with surprise. She did remember him then.

"Here," she said, "have a cherry." She opened her bag. A look of surprise was followed by an expression of humorous pathos. "Oh, there is but a little hole only."

"Is this what you're looking for?" he said, and revealed them in his forage-cap.

Her free ringing laugh matched his. "Oh," she said, wiping the tears from her eyes, "this is magic like on the stage."

She patted his hand. He looked at her with undisguised pleasure. She was the same and not the same. In her pretty youthful sports outfit, with her sunburn, her sparkling eyes, the carnation pinned on her dress, her neat white gloves and simple handbag, her simple white cloche hat swinging from her hand, her sensible shoes, she might have been any girl he had met at home at a garden-party. She wore hardly any make-up; a little rouge and a touch of powder, nothing else.

"You look nice."

They walked slowly back to the inn.

"I was telling the manager how much I liked the country round here."

"There is a very pretty lake. It is quiet. Sometimes I lie in the grass and watch it for a long time. It is like crystal gazing. It is so peaceful."

"You like the quiet. Doesn't it bore you sometimes?"

"Why, yes, naturally," she said, and shrugged her shoulders.

For a moment he had an insight into her loneliness; the gesture of resignation sharpened his pity for her. He could well understand how bitter her life was, how its sterility enclosed her like a gaol, how the knowledge of being an outcast preyed on her spirit. It was not by chance that she welcomed his friendly call; even the fact that it was fortuitous, involving a mere errand, did not detract from her happiness; after all, he could so easily have asked her to send the watch by post.

When they came to the inn she asked him to order a drink. It was to go on her bill, she insisted. He was her guest, his money was useless here, which was in its way her home. He must not refuse. She would be hurt!

Whilst he drank the lager she went up to her room. She was down in a few moments with his watch.

"There. It has been wound up for you regularly."

"Thank you. And now you must have something with me or I will be hurt."

The manager served them. When he had gone they were left almost alone in the lounge.

"It is quiet at this time of the year. It must be like a grave in winter."

"It is not very well known. It is off the main roads, you see, and the manager—he is also the proprietor—is a retired sea captain who inherited the place from his parents. He does not care if anyone comes here at all. One or two people come regularly for the holidays, I believe. They are mostly friends of his. Sometimes they don't pay. But he lets them come again; he is a good-natured man. He tells me stories about his travels, but his wife watches him like a hawk. The English sailors are of a popular disposition with the female sex."

"Popular disposition? One says 'popular with'."

"Popular with. Thank you."

"But what do you do here all the time?"

"You ask me that? You, a soldier! I am alone and at peace. It is good to be by oneself, is it not? I walk, lie on the grass, watch the clouds, nature. It is good to know that you need do nothing!"

"Yes, it is nice sometimes. I felt like that once when I got back from a week under fire. Every day—once, twice, sometimes three times in a day—we were sent up. When I had my leave they gave me a big reception at home. All my friends turned up. We drank till midnight. Speeches and shouting and clapping."

All the time I longed to be out in the country, go for a long walk by the river at night, feel the peace in the sky, in the air, get it into my lungs." He smiled. "But for you it must be very dull at times, for all that."

"It is dull, very, very dull, yes. Sometimes I think I hate myself I am so bored; I sometimes feel as though my body is too heavy for me, it wearies me to carry it, I am so bored with myself; my shadow, my reflection in the glass seems to be a spy set to watch me. But always it is millions and millions and millions better than being in London for me."

This involuntary outburst made her tremble slightly, and he became pale. She turned and smiled as though to reassure him about something. She looked apologetic. He felt relieved when she changed the subject.

"Sometimes I read, you know. I like reading now. I never used to very much at home in Vienna. I was always gay, very, very thoughtless. My brothers used to spoil me dreadfully. On my birthdays they would conspire to please me, not allow me to do a thing, wait on me, call me—the way one addresses royalty——"

"Your Majesty . . ."

"Like that. Your majesty. It was not good for me, but I loved it. But I talk too much about myself. Tell me about yourself, Philip."

"Oh, never mind about that. My name is Hayward. Boy Hayward."

"Boy Hay-ward. Boy?"

"Yes."

She laughed. "It is a nice name. Boy. It is simple, art-less. It does not pretend. Is your sister called Girl and your pets Dog and Cat?" She laughed. "It is quite right. A dog is a dog and a boy is a boy. Just so! Why call him anything else? When you are an elderly grandfather with a beard you will be called old boy."

"I hope they will have enough respect for me then to address me as 'sir'."

"I will call you Boy, and you call me Girl," she laughed. "My name is Frieda Carel."

It was a strange introduction. They said nothing for a little while, and then she asked him if he could stay to lunch.

"I'd love to. Where shall we have it?"

"In the garden. I know exactly where. It is pretty, but you must not be afraid of the bees. They are trained."

He roared with laughter. The surprise on her face sent him off into fresh fits. "You mean the proprietor keeps bees. Bees are not trained. They are kept. Elephants and fleas are trained, not bees."

"Bees kept, fleas trained." She shrugged her shoulders in despair.

Boy usually did not care to have his meals in the open. He was always afraid of dust or green flies, but the cloth was spotless. The food was very good, and she offered him two helpings of everything. The fresh air somehow made everything taste better and smell nicer.

"No," she said, "you cannot have an ice-cream after the cider."

"Oh, I say. I'd rather fancy an ice."

"No, no. It will not agree with the cider. I know what is good for boys. If you had a chance you will eat yourself into a sickness."

He could not explain the different uses of 'sickness' to her. Nor could he make her change her mind about the ice. She insisted she had had to keep her brothers in check in exactly the same way. The way they ate, she explained, paralysed her with astonishment; they would have devoured the cloth were it not for the firm watch she kept. She had a great deal of practice with what agreed with the digestion of boys.

So she associated him with her brothers. He was touched. He watched her preside over the coffee, which she had made herself in the Viennese way. It was an eye-opener. He assured her he had become a coffee convert; the stuff he had drunk before was unrecognizable.

After lunch they had some of the cherries which she had washed. They amused themselves aiming the pips at a bird's drinking-bowl. He gave her three shies to his one, and she let him win handsomely. A silence settled as they lazed in the deck-chairs. She wore sun-glasses and had taken her jacket off, opening her blouse at the throat.

"I feel as lazy as you look," she said. "This sun is a flirt. In Austria it is as reliable as a clock. Here one has to carry an umbrella to make sure it will be fine."

He asked her about her native country. She was a little unwilling to talk about it, but in the end he managed to draw her out. It seemed so many years ago—decades!—since she was a student of languages, the youngest member of a crowd of college folk, cadets, the milieu that comprised her middle-class friends and acquaintances in Vienna. They led a café life; there were

innumerable gatherings and parties, dances in the evening, concerts and opera. She had been full of the zest of life. Her diletante studies in languages were only an excuse to mix in that circle; she was on the whole a poor student, dipped into the most romantic and light novels when she should be at work on serious texts; she was the despair of her tutor, with whom she used to flirt outrageously. But what did it matter? Was she not the darling of the young set? Did they not obey her every fancy? She was inviolable, serene, conscious of her power to do as she pleased; no one could compel her to do anything against her will, not even her father, whom she twisted round her finger; if you wanted her to do something she had to be flattered and coaxed! Politics bored her, so when she joined a group of friends the conversation had to be changed. Of a group of six, if five wanted to go to the opera and she wanted to dance, they would dance. She was always looking for some fascinating *new* ideal man, a combination of Galahad and Gable; she did not mean to hurt anyone, but she unconsciously flirted with all the men in her circle. When someone did something foolish she would be sorry, but a week later she would encourage yet another to make a fool of himself. She did not know what she wanted. She was subject to day-dreams that sometimes spun out in private romances for a week until she suddenly got tired of her imaginary hero and he took on the personality of a different 'ideal', an actor or an aviator or whoever struck her fancy. Yes, these waking dreams were the only reality; sometimes the fancies she had were so delicious that she wept at her thoughts. She could not understand herself. She seemed to herself an enigma, an entrancing, profound and tantalizing mystery. She would shake her head before the mirror, pout and then sigh with languor, melancholy and happiness at the untapped treasure-house of emotion that was Frieda Carel. She would criticize her friends mercilessly; she wanted everyone to be more gallant, more brave, to pursue beauty and truth and not money or careers. She had heart-to-heart talks with youths, whom she fired with thoughts of great missions, great sacrifices.

She broke off. The picture she drew seemed to her deliciously funny, but to Boy it seemed enchanting. Of course, he recognized that she had been a spoiled and foolish girl, that her irresponsible behaviour to the youths in her circle needed stern reproof, but on the whole what a picture of innocuous, gay and graceful youth; what peccadilloes she committed could so easily be forgiven in anyone so young, so inexperienced and charming;

her one sin was to be born in these times of a family that spoiled and 'protected' her. Boy felt more and more unhappy at the thoughts that entered his head. He was not aware that she had stopped talking.

"Oh, heavens," she said, "how nice it is to talk of what was once, although it seems so long, long ago that it belongs to another life or another person."

"I don't know," he said gallantly, "I can easily see you being spoiled and petted atrociously."

She smiled distantly, shaking her head vigorously. "Spoiled. . . . My dear friend, if you only knew how . . . humble I am now, how grateful when a little dog comes frisking to me and kisses my hand. It happened a few months ago in London, and I felt so happy and so sad that I took the little dog and embraced it and cried."

Boy understood, even through the pathos of these words, how her whole spirit, though it lay prone and enslaved, waited for revolt, for escape from the life she was leading; how she had poured her heart out to him at the first genuinely friendly advance. He felt mechanically in his pocket for cigarettes. He could not find a light, and before he could stop her she ran into the hotel and brought back a box of matches. She refused a cigarette, but lit his. The act of service added its note to her grateful friendliness, her desire to please.

He romanced a little about his own life, describing the family solidarity that was so rare. She asked him about his schooling. He had had a grand time at school and at the university; he told her he could not understand the way some fellows ran down their schools or sneered at the ancient universities; he supposed that there were many square pegs in round holes, poor fellows, but for himself he had had great fun. He enjoyed his studies; he had a quick and logical mind and was very good at figures, nothing to boast about, though; he excelled in all sports; he had been popular with his fellow students and lecturers; he had had a reputation for being good-natured, and was often called upon to patch up quarrels; he was famous for his tact; he could not understand how some fellows lost their tempers, saw imaginary insults, were envious of more fortunate colleagues; for his own part he wished the clever and successful ones the best of luck. He had a good job now—this was merely an interruption. "If everyone pulled together with a will it need not be prolonged agonizingly; Hitler did not have a dog's chance against the British and the Americans. This may sound like boasting, particularly in

view of the way people talked before the French collapse, but he sincerely believed that the whole tradition of democratic government brought out the very best in the country, including in its industries, its science. A system that dragooned people into service hadn't a chance against a more advanced social structure. Anyhow, his experience in the fighting front had shown him that there was a higher morale, a greater resilience amongst the British. He saw young boys of nineteen and twenty put to flight gangs of tough veterans of the Luftwaffe. Of course, he did not want to underestimate the courage of the German pilots; they were great fliers. But"—he shrugged his shoulders—"it is not the same thing. We have a spirit in the fight which is different from having a spirit in fighting. Well, after we've won the war we'll patch these things up. We'll pick up the German people even as a gladiator helps a wounded rival to his feet. Yes, pick them up and put them on their feet. Our quarrel is not with the German people, German women and children. . . . Oh, well, I was talking about my job. It's not anything special, nothing to talk about; all right for me, but a bit of a bore for others." He was attached to a firm of chartered accountants. They were paying his salary—five fifty a year, less income-tax and his army pay. The prospects were good. It sounded dull, but interesting problems sometimes cropped up; once he had to investigate a bankruptcy fraud; it was exciting. But he could not say he was really happy in his work; he would have liked to do something more active; empire-building, exploring perhaps. It may seem rather young to talk like that, but there it was. The firm were very generous to keep up his salary throughout the war; it was more than he was worth.

Well, there it was, he concluded, apologetically. He looked at her. She was smiling. She began to chuckle. "Yes, you English are unbeatable. Any nation that looks upon the war as some nuisance that interrupts the serious business of tennis and football and arithmetic in offices and empire-buildings—! An interruption!" She laughed.

Boy was very quick to see another's point of view. "I'm sorry. Please forgive me for sounding so smug; I've had one or two big days, and unless you keep up your sense of optimism—it makes things difficult."

She stopped laughing straight away. "Forgive *me*. I should have understood. You are so young, though, I can never seriously look upon you as some hard soldier."

He was fascinated by the expressiveness of her eyes that showed

a change of mood in a moment from sparkling roguish gaiety to serious sympathy. Her face had a slight flush, her hair seemed alive; he saw in the soft quickness of her movements, her animation, how much she valued this talk.

She asked him about his life at the air station, and he told her about his friends, their sense of attachment to one another in spite of all differences of temperament, of outlook.

"I suppose," he said finally, "that after the war we'll all go back to our jobs, and if we ever meet again we'll be poles apart once more. The man who will risk his neck to help you in a life and death struggle these days will think twice about lending you a fiver in years to come. Life is mysterious and sombre, isn't it?"

"That is why we must look at nature and feel the sun on our faces and be grateful just for that."

He began to feel quite at home with her. She entered into his moods with the quickness of intuition; no girl he met at home could respond to the conflicts, the melancholy that were with him these days.

But they were very young, and melancholy was something so intrinsically foreign to their temperament that in a few minutes they were both laughing heartily at the scene they witnessed in the lounge.

A dog had jumped on the table and, seeing his reflection in the mirror on the wall, bristled and then began to sniff vainly.

"Frieda. . . ."

"Yes, Boy?" she said, smiling.

"It's nice to talk to you."

"Thank you."

"I had no idea how nice it would be."

She pulled a long blade of grass and then another which she passed to him. They chewed.

"Let us pretend," she said, "that we are not lazy and going for a nice walk by the lake."

"Yes. Isn't that a lovely rose-bush?"

"Beau-tiful. Why, thank you."

"What's that for?"

"For giving me a red rose for my hair."

"Of course. What lovely hills over there in the distance, and the sun sparkling on the snow gives them a lovely radiance."

"Heavens! There are no mountains?"

"Well, once we're pretending we might as well go all the way." They laughed and lapsed into tranquil silence.

For an hour or two they seemed to forget everything. They talked idly, watched the changing pattern of the sky; birds in flight, a breeze, a picturesque tramp who passed by the inn—these made topics of conversation. The bees were very tame. He watched her put a lump of sugar in the palm of her hand and a bee hover over it, make a three point landing and rub its velvety body against the warm cavern of her hand whilst he examined the rock of sugar.

"I read somewhere about the life of the ants and the bees," she said, "and a story about an empire of ants that fought against another for the territory that lay between two blades of grass."

He remembered the story. Idly he commented on the aftermath of the war and remarked that some of the innovations, the glider, for instance, would make grand peace-time sport. "We could learn to fly without engines, just like the bees, perhaps. Can you imagine it, the sky swarming with chattering and laughing people, gliding and looping, alighting on trees. It would be an ideal form of courting, too. To make love in the air, girls and boys embracing at ten thousand feet and soaring and diving, their lips together, just like falcons mating."

This imaginative flight appealed to her, but she confessed that she was very air sick the only time she had ever been in a plane. They laughed.

He made no move to go and they sat together till nearly four. For a whole hour he had forgotten completely what she was; it was very difficult on this heavenly day, in this quiet garden, sitting beside a very attractive girl, to remember the most pressing matters. He could not associate her any longer with the indifferent, self-possessed woman of that sombre night in London.

Suddenly he looked at his watch and uttered an exclamation.

"Oh, Lord, I'm supposed to be on duty at five! I'll be late."

She rose with him.

"I'm sorry . . . have I kept you?"

"Not against my will."

"I'll come with you to the station . . . if you want me to."

"You know I do."

She just looked at herself for a moment in her hand-mirror and gave a touch to her face, then slipped her arm through his.

They strolled slowly. He was very sorry to go and yet he wanted to be alone for a while with his thoughts, which were disturbing in the extreme. Whenever he thought of the life she led he seemed crushed by his sense of pity . . . and he had

played his part in victimizing her . . . he could never forgive himself for that.

As they were in sight of the station he suddenly decided that it could not end like that, that there must be some further meeting, some atonement, some gesture that could express the profound feelings that moved him. He suddenly stopped. She seemed to read what he felt in his face, for she lowered her eyes.

"Frieda . . . I have enjoyed this afternoon. When will you go——" He swallowed and changed the question. "How long are you staying here?"

"Till the end of the week."

"That's another four days."

"Four days."

"I have a week-end leave. Shall I spend it with you at the inn?"

For a brief moment she gave him a searching suspicious glance. When he realized what she was thinking he flushed; he felt a choking sensation.

"No, *please* don't think that!"

Her lower lip trembled. "Forgive me . . ."

"Good-bye, Frieda. I'll see you on Saturday."

He bent down and kissed her hair. She pressed his hand. He ran up the station steps as though pursued. She waved to him as the train bore him off, her white figure growing smaller and smaller until it became grey. It seemed forlorn.

7

at
Oct. 1943

HE pulled up outside the inn and had a look in the back seat for his bag and kit. He had borrowed Bill Farson's car, a low-slung sporting model that set up a fiendish racket over sixty. He felt excited at the thought of seeing her again. The picture he had of her from last time had become dimmed already. He wondered if he had been mistaken . . . if his sense of pity had played tricks with him.

He was just opening the door of the car when she ran out of the lounge door to meet him. He stopped on the step of the car, waiting. Her eyes were sparkling and her hair sailed back in the wind. She was almost out of breath.

"A car! How nice. Is it your own? What have you brought—oh, bags and bags! And a tennis racket! What, no golf clubs?" She leaned over inquisitively, laughing with pleasure,

kicking her heel. Then she looked at him shyly and said nothing.

She wore a new tweed costume, a navy colour, with wide square shoulders, brogues; she had splashed on some lipstick in an intriguing quantity, but otherwise had practically no make-up; her hair had been brushed till it shone like silk, and a perfume, delicate, elusive, clung to it.

"So you did come," she said at last. He did not answer; he merely leaned against the car, trying to meet her eye.

"Did you have any doubts?" he said at last.

"I won't have . . . again."

"No, no," he said as she tried to get the bag out of the car. He took it himself, together with the tennis kit.

"What have you got in there? Your toothbrush?"

He glanced at the good-sized travelling bag.

"I thought I'd bring a change of clothes. We're not supposed to change into civvies unless we have at least a week's leave, but never mind about that."

"Oh, you mustn't—what if you are seen?" She was quite alarmed.

"Oh, this military red tape doesn't matter a hang."

"Please—you mustn't! Military rules are very serious!"

"Oh, we are sensible about these things here," he said.

She shook her head. "In Austria—if it is verboten . . ."

"Bless you, this isn't German-occupied territory."

By this time they had entered the lounge. The manager greeted him casually. When Boy told him he wanted to stay the week-end he merely shifted his pipe from one corner of his mouth to the other and nodded.

"You can have the room on the second floor. Number seven." This room, Boy discovered, was next to hers. The manager—his name was Kelly—took a little while to find the register. When he was asked the price of the room he scratched his head a moment. Then he turned to Frieda and said, "How much do we charge you, lassie? The wife handles these things," he added apologetically.

"Half a guinea a day at this time of year."

Kelly nodded, chewed his pipe and said, "You'll find a bath on the same floor. As there's only Miss Sorel with you on the second floor I don't suppose you'll object to sharing it with her."

This mild jest being greeted with polite silence, Kelly coughed deprecatingly, as though he didn't know what the younger generation was coming to.

As soon as he had gone they laughed. Boy liked this easy-

going old scamp; he made a mental note of the fact that the rules in this hotel were winked at broadly. He looked at Frieda, but she seemed occupied with examining his rackets.

"I brought them along as I saw a court here. Do you play?"

"Yes." She added hesitatingly, "I play very well."

"Well," he laughed, "I'm glad to hear it."

"I know how dull it is for a good player to play with a poor one. I think I will give you a good game." She added, "I am glad."

"That's nice of you. I see you take it for granted I play well."

"But of course! These rackets. They are not only very good ones, but they are so well kept."

"Germany has produced some top notchers. Have you ever seen——" He mentioned a famous continental professional. "I saw him matched against Vines in Paris once. He was magnificent."

"Yes," she said, "he taught me to play."

He was taken aback. For a moment a horrible suspicion came to him. Was she romancing? In that case, could he rely on anything she told him? With all his predisposition to believe her, with all the deep note of sincerity and truth in the account of her past life, he yet had known her only such a short while. Could he accept as gospel the word of this woman? Well, he could soon find out. She didn't know that he had studied the technique of this Austrian professional; he had a special back-hand that was a very individual and easily recognizable trait.

"You need not be surprised," she said. "I was taught all the useless sports that are thought to be so important for young ladies. Tennis, riding, dancing and so on." She gave her expressive shrug.

"Shall we play before lunch?"

"Yes, for bon appetit."

They went upstairs together. They entered their rooms simultaneously. His was an old-fashioned room with a big double-poster bed, a big brick fireplace and old cupboards, very roomy and warm from the stoves. The dressing-table had a marble top and a mirror. The windows were wide open and a small pot of ferns stood on the ledge. He took it down in case some dust was blown on the bed. The latter looked quite clean and well aired.

It took him a few minutes to change into flannels and a pull-over. He finished unpacking and then practised a few swings before the mirror with the racket.

A few minutes later he knocked on her door. She opened it a

few inches. "Forgive me for being so long. I had such a time to find suitable garments!" Then she shut the door.

He waited, laughing at her pedantic language. He was pleased that she had not asked him in. He did not know whether he had expected her to do so or not. It gave him an insight of that latent suspicion he harboured for her, and he condemned himself for it.

Then she opened the door. "Am I suitable?" she inquired.

"You should say, 'Am I presentable?' But you shouldn't even say that."

She wore a white silk frock, ankle socks and rubber shoes; a white silk turban kept her hair in check. Her youthful figure was etched freely in the light dress and she moved with a special vitality.

"You should take a jumper with you or something. You'll want to cool off later."

When they came down to the court he examined it critically. It was in fairly good shape. He peeled off his sweater, gave her choice of weapons, and they spun for service. She won and insisted on taking the side which would give the sun in her face.

He sent a few practise shots across court and she returned them all with deep driving movements. He opened his eyes wide, pleasantly surprised. They began the game. He had not touched a racket the whole of the season, but he had forgotten little and his very freshness added a fine touch to his game. He was a very good amateur player, he had a flair for that sort of thing.

He wondered if he could get his length straight away for the express services so beloved by the American aces and keen amateurs. He took the measure of the court. He would aim for that angle of court just on her back-hand. The first ball struck the top of the net. His racket swung again. That was it! He saw the ball star to the corner. She turned and swept it back, a half-volley, back-hand, with that stabbing stroke of the Austrian, powerful and wristy. He let the ball go he was so overcome by the sudden wave of high happiness that surged through him. Then he settled down to the game with a will. She was a keen opponent; her movements were graceful and smooth, she made things look very easy and simple. On the whole he had to rely on superior strength and speed; after the first few games—in which the score was even—he had an estimate of her play. She was very strong on the back-hand, driving hard with a deep impelling action, the racket swinging low from the knees, whilst her skirt flared about her as a ballet dancer's. Her service had a

strong spin and her general strategy was good; she liked playing for position, keeping him well back whilst she moved in, and then cutting the ball with a delicate precision short over the net. His own game relied on hard driving, express services, the dazzling passing shot; his tactics were not so sound. But the speed of his game restricted her chances of positional play.

After the first set, which she won at 7—5, he began to feel his joints and muscles gloriously loosened up; a warm glow toned up his whole body and he moved effortlessly, revelling in its instant response to his will, in the smoothness of co-ordination between eye and hand. He could not relax for a moment; there was none of the tolerant and amused boredom which so often accompanied his games with girls who had not his hard training and love of sport; she was a remorseless contestant who would give him no quarter. There were no polite compliments and amused sympathies. She kept him on his mettle. And with the increasing tempo of the play he found greater and greater resources of energy, zest and speed. The game took on a sweeping rhythm; they kept pace with each other, eye and hand and body under easy control so that their swift, strong loose movements kept time with each other as in some dance. Drive and volley, cut and spin, the long ranging cross-shot, the slow weaving flight that followed the wristy turn, the piston-hard crack of the fast service, these followed on each other in the ebb and flow of the game which was sometimes delicate and thoughtful, sometimes exhilaratingly fast, sometimes taxing all his powers of control during the deceptive manœuvre. And throughout the game there was a deep strain of delight in the undercurrent of emotion—challenge and tenderness—that coloured all forms of intercourse between a youth and a girl.

She kept her end up to the last; she did not make the mistake of letting him win, which he would have sensed immediately. She responded all the time to his enthusiasm, heightened it with her own. Yet it was her wisdom which told her when to stop the game—immediately after the climax of the game and before the rapid deterioration following exhaustion both of the body and mind began to set in. She stopped even though she was still winning slightly.

She came up to the net when the scores stood at 7—5, 6—3, 3—6. A little out of breath, her eyes glowing, she said, "Oh, let's stop now. I'll be all in in a few minutes. You play a very fast game; you keep me on the run all the time."

He laughed and tossed his racket, spinning, high in the air,

caught it, cleared the net and slipped his arm round her. She leaned against his shoulder.

"Did you really enjoy it so much?" she said. "I am so glad. It was great fun."

They went to sit in their deck-chairs, her jumper tied about her carelessly, sipped iced orange squash. They discussed the game in detail, replaying some of the best rallies. They both had a sense of release; their tired bodies were deliciously at rest in the mild sun; their voices were alight with the discovery of a common interest, an enthusiasm of youth in the energy and grace of the body.

She opened her handbag and produced some American cigarettes. They were a brand very difficult to get these days; she had seen him smoking them at their last meeting. He was quite gratified.

"That's terribly nice of you. You must have had an awful trouble getting them."

"It's such a little thing," she protested. But she was pleased.

By the time they had finished washing for lunch their table was spread for them in the same place in the garden. Needless to say they had the appetites of youthful titans; between them they finished a whole roast chicken with a bottle of Hock which he ordered.

"Liebfraumilch!" she said, her eyes laughing. "You understand?"

"Yes. Lovely milking maid. I ordered it specially."

She coughed over his gaspers, and they laughed once more. They laughed at the slightest thing, sometimes for no reason at all.

"What have you been doing since Wednesday?" he asked.

"Nothing, of course. It was nice. Yes . . . I went to the town yesterday and I found a lovely little old book shop that has some old continental magazines. I bought these and also a beautiful little fairy-story book called *Morte d'Arthur*. Of course, you know it?"

"Yes. I read it years ago. I used to want to be like Lancelot."

"I'm afraid I'm as sentimental as ever," she said. "I try and try to be hard and practical—heaven knows I have reason to be—but I am very sentimental. It is so absurd, isn't it? Shall I read you some of it? I marked some passages that made me feel very sad. I cry easily, you know, which gives me great enjoyment. It doesn't deceive me, though. I know it is absurd."

"I suppose you would like to live in those days?"

"Heavens, no! Think of the sanitation!"

"Let's sit in the shade and then you'll read me some of it."

He carried their deck-chairs under a very handsome copper beech at the bottom of the garden. They settled down, and she opened the book, which was a slim leather-bound volume, very nicely illustrated. As soon as she began to read he got a surprise. It was in French. She seemed to take it for granted that he knew the language of Britain's loyal and traditional ally. But it made no difference. She had a very pleasant accent, delicate and precise, with the lilting intonation of the South; there was nothing heavy or harsh in her speech. He studied her face, the configuration of the nose and lips, the somnolent hazel eyes that changed to a deep dark blue in the shadow of the tree; he was quite happy.

When she stopped and looked at him inquiringly, he gave her a detailed account of the mechanical wonders of the latest aircraft for a full ten minutes; its speed, range, manoeuvrability, fire-power and all the latest gadgets.

Her pretence at intelligent interest amused him.

"All right," he said, "I won't bore you any more."

"But I am not bored!"

"No, nor was I. But I couldn't understand a word."

She looked in perplexity a moment at her book. Then she understood.

Instead of laughing she was quite shocked. "But why didn't you stop me?"

"Why didn't you stop me?" he countered.

"No, no. But that is quite different."

"Silly. I don't know much French and I don't care. But I understand the language your eyes speak; it's quite enough for me."

"Promise me you'll always tell me if you are bored," she insisted.

"But why should I have the privilege of boring you?"

"No, no, you must promise me, please."

At last he saw that she would only be happy if he promised. They began to talk of other things, but he found himself trying to analyse this unexpected trait within her. Once or twice he thought he noticed a deep, almost harassed look in her eyes. Her laughter no longer seemed to ring quite true, her spontaneous responses to his enthusiasms lacked their early light-heartedness. She was quite clearly devoting herself to the task of pleasing him. He thought it would be useless to try to con-

vince her that he did not want this special consideration, that, in fact, it embarrassed him. And also, there was another quality in her, a preoccupation, as though there was some task she had left unfulfilled and had forgotten what it was. It was expressed in her slight air of anxiety in an unguarded moment or an involuntary start of sheer nervousness. He would then speak to her gently, as though she had momentarily become his patient, until once more they entered their mood of comradeship.

As the afternoon progressed they began to reap the harvest of the unconscious process of mutual discovery of one another. Although when he met her eye her look was soft, with that invitation commingled with playful challenge of all courting couples, nevertheless she sometimes had a taut look, an expression of deep brooding and that stern self-assurance which was her protection against some inner pain and unhappiness. This he had noticed during that night in town, but now he had a much deeper understanding of that look. He felt towards her now when he saw it only a deeper pity and tenderness bordering on melancholy.

"Lord, it's nearly four," he said, glancing at his watch. "And I had planned to do so much to-day. What do you want to do, Frieda? Shall we go for a walk? You'll be able to show me your haunts."

"Of course."

"But perhaps you're tired of them? I suppose you must be. The ground is far too familiar to you. Perhaps you'd rather go for a run in the car?"

"Would you like that better?"

"I don't mind."

"Well, really, I don't mind, either. I'm entirely in your hands."

"But haven't you any idea of what you would like to do? What plans have you made?"

"I'm no good at all at plans. I never make any. When I have a fit of conscience I make two or three at once and then get so confused I am in despair."

"Perhaps," he said, laughing, "you're like the person who just wants to have leisure to sit and stare at a tree or a cow."

"That is as good as anything to look at."

But this did not satisfy Boy. He loved to have a plan of action. He was never fully happy unless he was carrying it out. He had a programme for every day, and he did not regard it complete unless he had fulfilled it. This made unnecessary the fulfilment

of the benefit promised by the plan; the plan was the thing; if it didn't give him the satisfaction he anticipated it could not be helped, he had done his part. And there was only one type of person Boy could not get on with, somebody who had a rival plan. Thus it suited him admirably that Frieda should put herself entirely at his disposal. Her one wish was that he should take on the full responsibility of carrying it out. She disliked being consulted about rival amusements; she had no sense of time; she detested practical inquiries at railway stations, post offices, hotels and the like; she disliked arranging practical affairs. At the same time she was in awe of anyone who could read a time-table, who knew what he was after and went after it with unerring sense of direction.

It did not take them long to find out these qualities in one another. After that it was plain sailing.

"I suggest we go for a drive in the car. We cover more ground that way, and it will give us a chance to finish up at, say—Maidenhead by seven or eight. We can have dinner there, and then later go somewhere we can dance or see a show."

She nodded energetically.

"Good," he said. "Now, what's the best route to take?"

She mentioned one or two vaguely.

"Frieda, do you know or are you guessing?"

"Guessing."

"Right. Then I'll get a map from the hotel and find out."

Within a quarter of an hour he had learned more about the district than she had discovered in many weeks.

"My dear," he said, "don't try and help. This is a one man's job. Meanwhile if you'd like to change your shoes I'll be ready when you come down."

"Shoes?"

"Yes. I thought we might want to dance somewhere later."

"Oh, yes. I was forgetting. You think of everything."

When she came down she was dressed in a smart dove-grey costume with navy shoes and a Robin Hood hat; she had put on some fresh make-up for the evening, and some nice scent in her hair and behind her ears.

"Now," she said, "whilst I get the tea, you go along and change into your uniform."

"Oh, no!"

"I insist, Boy. I will not come with you otherwise. You don't know whom you might meet. Particularly in Maidenhead. All London is there these evenings."

There was nothing for it. "I like the way you order me around. You might be my——" He hesitated just a fraction of a second, and she said with perfect naturalness:

"Your commanding officer."

Boy could have bitten his tongue off for beginning that unfortunate sentence, and cursed himself that, having begun it, felt impelled to stop. He should have had the grace to finish the remark; she would have understood it was spoken in jest, it obviously committed him to nothing. He could not help noticing that although she had covered his embarrassment skilfully, the brave effort to smile could not conceal her pain at his inability to formulate, even in jest, any fulfilment of their relationship. Already she had turned away and was running towards the lounge, ostensibly to give instructions about tea.

Over tea she was charming and vivacious, full of excitement about their outing; she entertained him with an imitation of a well-known continental actress at a press interview. By temperament very sociable, Boy enjoyed all such manifestations of high spirits and added to it with his own sallies. They were in a very gay mood when they set out a little after five.

Farson's was a big and roomy car, smelt of leather and tobacco, and was, when properly coaxed, capable of over ninety. Boy always boasted that he could get an extra ten out of any car. They made themselves comfortable and he tucked a rug up to her waist.

"It's all right, you'll need it."

She looked very cosy and small.

"How can you see to drive with that bonnet so high?"

"If you ever tried speeding in the black-out you wouldn't worry about such things."

They were passing some very pleasant countryside. The yellow road wound like a river between green fields, wooded hills; the warm wind blew in their faces, bringing the perfume from the flower-filled meadows; the sun hung high, transfixing the sky with bronze flame, reflecting dancing lights in the wind-screen. He handled the car with that discretion of a driver who knows to a hair's-breadth its capacity, he sensed its every impulse and his hands moved sensitively on its controls. From a standstill he had urged it imperceptibly to a good round speed with such tact that she had no idea how quickly they moved; the country rolled by so smoothly that they might have been watching it from cinema seats; hill and valley, bridge and field, barn and farm, river and meadow impinged on their memories in a series of

impressions that became crystallized in a picture that was green, fragrant and warm. Occasionally he slowed down to less than walking pace when they breasted a steep hill and the full horizon embraced cameo-neat fields, orchards, grazing fields, toy farms, silver river and a steaming mellow-stoned village with its inevitable silhouette of church-steeple aspiring skywards.

They spoke little, and she taught him a very charming song by Schubert, which he learned to hum. They pulled up near the bank of a stream and went for a walk round to stretch their legs. She pointed out a thorny wild rose-bush that rambled along an ancient fence. When he tried to pluck some of the flowers he got scratched and a tiny bubble of blood appeared on his finger. She took the flower whose stem had drawn his blood and, throwing the rest into the stream, put it into her button-hole. She looked very attractive as she dreamingly breathed in the sharp scent of the wild flower. The petals stirred under her breathing, her red lips matching their soft colour. Then she smiled and took his hand. She kissed the wrist gently and put it against her cheek.

"You have shed blood for a lady, my chivalrous Boy. What shall be your reward?"

It was their first real kiss. She shut her eyes, touched his mouth softly and hesitatingly a moment, her eyelids flickered and she turned her face away. He took her hand, his heart beating.

"Shall we go now?" she said quietly.

He took her back to the car without a word. As they drove on in silence he suddenly realized how he valued her company; they did not say a word for nearly a quarter of an hour—it is difficult to converse freely whilst driving—and all the time he was happy merely to have her by his side. He expressed his exuberance of feeling in action. He opened the throttle and the car swung with an impetuous racket past a limousine. The road began to grow blurred and wind dizzily. They were approaching cross-roads at scorching pace; it was a narrow, winding road, and he used his accelerator at the bends so that the car surged powerfully. He could see another sporting model flashing towards the cross-roads along the intersecting road. He trod flat on the board, taking the cross-roads without batting an eye, whilst the other car swerved with a shrill of brakes. A military transport lorry was overtaken, and as he nosed past he had to ease in between a passing van; he had less than a few inches on either side and, passing at nearly a hundred and fifty miles per hour, the wind

whacked the side of the car like a whip. He gave her a sidelong look. She was enjoying it serenely. Her face was in repose and a smile was playing on her lips; she had absolute confidence in him. He felt very proud and happy.

They had dinner in Maidenhead. They were both in excellent spirits, chattering all the time and forgetting time and place in a warm association of mind and feeling. He had discovered fresh traits in her. She had an easy humour of the sort that can laugh at one's own shortcomings. She admired his practical nature and spoke with disarming frankness and humility about her inability to balance her personal budget. She confessed she never knew where she was financially. At times she would be feverish with anxiety, only to discover that she had a good margin to see her through some time ahead; another time, with only a few pounds, she would fancy some picture that would go well with her flat in town, and find herself penniless in a moment. She confessed she liked pretty things; good clothes, nice furniture, a pleasant view. Money, of course, was a great necessity, but she was not a spendthrift. By spending just a little on pretty things she could make wonders; she was good at arranging things, had a good sense of colour, was skilful with her hands, and designed and made cushion-covers, tapestries and the like that made all the difference in the world. But she needed someone to run her affairs for her, to ration her spending, keep her books; otherwise she was a good housekeeper, could cook as well as sew, and had often planned perfect households if only she inherited a legacy! Her description of the sort of home she would have revealed a colourful and daring taste, but Boy had to point out that her original budget would be overspent before half the house was furnished.

"That doesn't matter really," she said cheerfully, "it's nicer to have just two or three rooms really pleasant than a whole house full of indifferent stuff."

"And what about the dining-room?" he said, reverting to her scheme. "You'll have a walnut grand and a Bokhara rug in the drawing-room and camp-stools in the kitchen and dining-room."

She admitted it was a strong argument. He laughed and instinctively took her hand. Her confession amused him and gave him a sense of pleasurable protection. Of this sort of girl one could either take advantage or cherish.

She was a curious mixture of penetrating understanding and naïveté. Many of the things she said showed an instinctive insight into people and events, at other times her simplicity amused

him. Following a very incisive analysis of the English character, she added with childlike inconsequence, "How much does the King of England get paid a week?"

After dinner she fell in eagerly with his wishes to go dancing somewhere. The town was packed, and they drove slowly through the old-fashioned streets until they found a popular road-house that stood a little way beyond the main thoroughfare. Cars were packed in the stand in spite of the petrol rationing; it was clear that the place was besieged by Londoners avoiding the imminent raids. They could hear dance music. Inside, a friendly waiter found them a table under some evergreen stands, which gave them a view from the window on the country-side. The place was decked with coloured lanterns, flags and paper flowers. It was well filled by a very heterogeneous crowd: men from the services with their womenfolk and a number of people from the West End. There was a very good band that, till recently, had played at a fashionable London hotel. The waiter was slow in bringing their cocktails.

He could not help being reminded of the last time he drank with her. How long ago it seemed, and what a long road they had travelled towards understanding and easy, warm friendship. He contrasted his feelings towards her then—the intoxicated, frightened, guilty fever of furtive passion with the confident, glad, spirited companionship. She seemed so different. He was immensely glad.

After a while the rhythm got into their feet, and with one accord they got up and danced. They glided into the beat of the music, translating its lilting, warm melody into swinging, swaying motion; they became merged with it, it crept seductively into their veins, their pulses seemed to have caught its nostalgic weeping rhythm; they were borne aloft in effortless harmony. They were sorry every time the dance finished.

They hardly talked at all; they danced for over an hour before he suggested they should go out to have a look at the sunset and get some fresh air.

"You've no idea what a time I'm having," he said. "It's the nicest evening I've ever spent."

"Oh, how can you say that!" She refused to believe it, but she was very pleased.

As they went on the veranda she missed a step and caught his arm with a little sharp cry.

"Are you all right?"

She did not answer for a moment.

"Frieda, what's up?"

"I'm all right," she said at length and smiled.

"You just make yourself comfortable," he said, pointing to a seat. "I'll go and get some more drinks."

It was some time before he returned. There was a big crush at the bar. As he came out through the big double doors he saw a man giving her a long once-over. He was a very smartly dressed middle-aged man with a diamond pin and a large signet ring; he had a dark-complexioned face, a big straight nose and bold, fine, tired eyes. The quizzical look he gave her made Boy realize he had met her before.

The man ignored Boy and sauntered up to her with an aplomb and self-assurance that Boy found unbearable. Boy noticed that he was dressed in a dust-grey perfectly cut suit that spoke of Savile Row; the diamond flashed on his natty silk shirt. He gave her a mock bow and smiled, rolling his eyes. He said good-humouredly, "My dear Fräulein, what a pleasant surprise." He began to address her in German.

Her manner was polite and serene. Boy felt a strange helplessness, irritation and—he had to confess—curiosity. It was clear they had met before. How would she deal with this situation?

He spoke fluent German, and for a minute or so she listened to him without a word. Then, without giving the appearance of interrupting but in fact doing so, she said in English, "Yes, but at present I am not in town. Will you please excuse me?"

He gave Boy a sharp stare, then bowed distantly.

Frieda turned away from him and slipped her arm into Boy's, and they went off. Neither made any comment.

It took him a little while to respond to her bright talk, although he was quite satisfied with the way she had handled the situation which, under the circumstances, was no more than she could do. But as she noticed his absence of mind she turned away for a moment with that slight shudder and a strained expression in her eyes. He took her hand gently. Neither said a word for a minute or two whilst he pressed her hand.

"Come on, Frieda, let's dance and dance!" He embraced her enthusiastically, lifting her almost off her feet. Then, their hands joined, they returned to the dance-floor.

In a few minutes it was no more than a memory, and later in the evening, when he remembered it, he felt nothing but satisfaction at the thought of her thoughtfulness, restraint and tact.

"You do enjoy dancing," she said.

He nodded happily, sweeping her into a deep turn. In fact, beyond the mere pleasure of moving to this laconic yearning primitive rhythm he had become aware once or twice of her thigh brushing against his, the insinuating pressure of her thin expressive hands, her scent, her immense hazel eyes which reflected his face as in a pocket photograph; the feeling that he impelled the graces of this lovely form heightened his sense of possession. By this time he felt no power on earth could stop him. His head was filled with the music and the impressions of her beauty, he moved with a sort of controlled languor.

He hated to part with her for a moment, and every time the music stopped he clapped enthusiastically and encored heartily.

"There's nothing as nostalgic as music, is there, Frieda?"

"Music or scent," she said. She suddenly went limp in his arms.

It was their eighth dance since they returned from the veranda. He caught her and stopped still, a little frightened. She was very white.

"What is it, Frieda?"

"Put your arm round my waist, please, and help me. I'll be all right in a moment."

It was her foot. When she had missed a step on the veranda she had twisted it sharply.

"Can I fetch some brandy, sir?" said the waiter quietly.

"No, no," she whispered. "I'll be all right in a moment. Really. Don't look so upset," she said to Boy.

"I'll take you outside. You need some fresh air, dear. We'll sit in the car."

He helped her, his arm round her, to the door, then carried her to the car.

It was quite dark now. There was no moon. The sound of the band seemed far away. He got out his flashlight and shone it on the foot. He nursed it between his hands a moment or two, feeling the joints.

"Yes . . . just there. Oh, dear, I'm going to cry in a minute. I'm so silly."

He gripped the foot gently and firmly.

"Don't tell me—when."

"I won't. Do you want a cigarette?"

"Please. It will stop me from crying."

"Blubber to your heart's content, silly. Here—I'll give you a light."

As she bent her head he pretended to search for the box of matches. He was gripping her foot and his hands felt as strong as iron, and gentle as silk. He bent her foot quickly and powerfully. She cried out sharply. But in a few minutes she was all right. He made her try to stand on it. She was afraid and he encouraged her.

"Go on, you're all right now. Don't be afraid."

"No, no!"

"You must!"

"I'm a dreadful coward. I'll never make a soldier."

He had to encourage her as though she were a child. Afterwards they sat in the car. She held her handkerchief to her face.

"Frieda."

"Yes?"

"Don't you see how foolish that was?"

"I don't know. Please don't scold."

"But we had eight dances. Eight! I counted them."

"You seemed to enjoy it so much. I hadn't the heart to tell you."

He tried to see her face.

"But it was absolutely mad!"

"No, no . . . please."

He gripped her by the arm and turned her to face him.

"Frieda," he said, and he was surprised at the passionate ring in his voice, "don't you see—as in the other thing—unless the girl is happy too, it means nothing . . . it is false, cruel."

He felt her tremble in his arms. He soothed her with broken words. A deep gratification, a suffocating sweetness of pity, filled him.

"It's . . ." she began, and swallowed, "it's very, very sweet of you to say that," she said.

8

THEY were sitting in the garden seat. It was evening and the sun was low in the sky. They had said nothing for a long time. At last Boy could not bear it any longer.

"I say, Frieda . . ."

"Yes?"

"I've had a wonderful time this week-end. Have you enjoyed it?"

She did not answer.

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"Frieda . . . you have, haven't you? You weren't—bored at all," he said shyly.

"How can you ask such a thing?" she said quietly and reproachfully.

"I don't know. Sometimes I feel so young, so childish almost when I'm with you."

"No, I was not bored."

"Then—then——"

"What are you trying to say?"

"I . . ." Then he lost courage. He could not meet her eye for a moment. He tried to hint at it. "You know, Frieda, we have a motto in the Air Force. *Per ardua ad astra*." He looked at her questioningly.

"Yes, I understand," she said. "Through striving to the stars."

"I . . . I never knew what it really meant till last night . . . after that dance. . . . You see, in my job I have learned a lot of things . . . to fight, to kill, to feel unafraid, free and strong . . . but it means nothing unless it is for something worthwhile. The Nazis, too, have courage and have learned all the lessons. But their striving is simply for material gain. Ours is . . . *ad astra*. Or so I used to think. But it was all very glib, you know. Like a slogan. Then, after I met you, I began to understand what the words meant. I—I'm afraid I'm not very good at this."

She said nothing.

"Frieda. . . ."

"Well, what is it?"

"Won't you stay here another week? Just a little while."

She did not look at him. Her voice was quite calm. "Why do you want me to?"

"Because . . . oh, because I want you to."

"But—I don't understand," she said. "You know what I am."

He blushed.

"I still want you to."

She laughed mirthlessly. She looked mystified, disturbed, and yet there was something amused and tender in her glance.

"But I don't understand. *Why? Why?*"

He could stand it no longer. "Don't you see, Frieda? I felt that I had finished the job begun by that Nazi."

The look she gave him was one of such incredulity that he was disturbed. She was more than incredulous, she was quite shocked. "How can you say such a thing!" she gasped. "Oh, how can you possibly say such a thing! You compare yourself with that swine!" She was angry with him. "No, no——"

"You're wrong, Frieda. What I said was quite true. If it were not for people like me, you would never have been forced to have done that thing."

She said something in German in her agitation. "No, *no!*" she said fiercely. "You must never say it! You must never even think it!" She took his hand and pressed it with a fervour that made her grasp unnaturally strong. "*Please!*"

"It is true, just the same. Don't you see? If you think about it you will see that it is."

She laughed helplessly. It made him hurt and upset.

"It is true," he said stubbornly. "And what is more it has made a mockery of my work in the Air Force."

"Oh, how stupid you are, mein klein. Promise me you will never say that again. Don't you see how bad it has made me feel. I cannot bear to see you hurt, I cannot bear to think that *I* should have hurt you. No, no. Promise me you won't talk such nonsense any more."

"But, Frieda, I am convinced! I——"

"If you go on about it I shall leave you at once. It is utterly absurd. You must not say that again, ever. Do you understand? Otherwise I shall be angry with you. Promise you won't!"

"Very well. But I want you to stay on—here."

She did not answer.

"Why, *why* don't you answer?"

"What can I say? I—can't stay here any longer."

He understood.

"I have booked your room for another week. You mustn't worry about that side of it."

"But why . . ." she repeated. She shook her head.

"I want to get to know you better. I like you. I want you to look on me as your friend, Frieda. Let me see you again here—perhaps when we get to know each other better we might learn to find some solution. Give it a trial, anyway. What harm can that do?"

He was surprised that she should offer such resistance to the idea. When he said he had booked her room she started and frowned.

"Frieda, say you will. Please!"

She shook her head. "It is very, very nice of you and very generous, but don't you see—what difference will a week make?" She shrugged her shoulders.

He was quite disheartened for a moment by these cold words. He felt some of the edge of his enthusiasm dull. Why was she

so indifferent? Why couldn't she return his spirited appeal? But he was a dogged young man.

"Please, do it for my sake. I want you to. It gives me great pleasure. And surely you will find it tolerable?"

She looked at him with amusement and pleasure.

"Yes," she said softly, "I will, as you say, find it tolerable."

He could not understand her. "Does that mean you will?"

Slowly she shook her head. "No, Boy, I cannot."

"But you must," he said, upset. "Besides, everything's settled. I've paid for your room in advance," he lied.

She flashed him a glance full of strange pain and despair. "You are very unwise," she said harshly, "and you are determined to hurt me. Don't you see—it will be much, much more difficult—in *the end*! Don't you understand?"

At last he understood.

For a time neither of them said anything. "In the end," he muttered confusedly. "In the end. Yes, I suppose one has to look at it that way. But, Frieda, why plan ahead your own unhappiness? Why, why must you be so hopeless about it? Have a little faith. God knows you have had a hard time, but don't lose all hope of the future. Perhaps there may be some solution. You are so young. Life isn't over for you. It is foolish to despair. Give me a chance to think, to plan . . . perhaps in time there may be a way out."

She winced and smiled with pain. "Oh, you are very, *very* young to have such hopes and ideals," she muttered.

"I don't see what's wrong with that," he said passionately. "Why not be young and have hopes? If it's impractical let's be impractical by all means! Long live! This world is run by practical people. Oh, yes! And a ruddy fine job they've made of it. For Christ's sake let's be impracticable!"

"Come on, Frieda my dear," he said a moment later, "just a week. Just a little week. . . ."

During the ensuing week he discovered many new things about her. Her air of maturity had pleased him and seemed a signal quality in one so young. What better combination than wisdom and youth? She did not seem wise merely in her conversation, which was always rather reserved, but in her handling of things, in her ability to cope with his every mood, in her likes and dislikes, in her complete content with simple things—a walk in the country, the picture of glasses standing on polished oak, a book, the artless grace of children.

She had, as with all genuinely civilized people, a rare sense of humour. Often he saw her smile at something which he could not understand. He felt very young then and his respect for her grew. Her ability to sum up character was a little disconcerting. She found out more about him in a few weeks than his family in a lifetime. Once he was reading a paper, and she said, "Do you think there will be an invasion?"

He was startled that she should know he was reading a strategy article about 'imminent attempt to attack the English coast'.

"I really don't know," he said. "But how on earth do you know I was reading about it?"

"I could tell by your expression of frivolous glee," she said, "as distinct from the solemn air you adopt when you read of the dramas on the sports page."

Her clairvoyance and quaint speech amused as much as disconcerted him.

"You're so clever," he challenged. "Tell me more about myself. Can you read my thoughts at other times?"

"Sometimes," she confessed. "I have learned some things about you."

"Go ahead and tell me, then." He pretended to disbelieve her. He was intensely curious.

"Well, you have a few stock reactions which give me the key each time. Your look of innocence and candour when you have made some indiscretion. Your bored look when someone is committing an impropriety or letting down the country by boasting. When there is an admiring look in your eye it is almost always because of some new military success by the Nazis."

"Oh, no!" he protested. This time he was quite shocked.

"You see how you protest. Obviously you recognize the feeling. You really do admire the Germans—reluctantly, of course—for their daring and efficiency, their military successes and their diplomatic astuteness."

"Well, go on!" he said.

"Whenever you are amused I know that it is either because someone has made a joke about the English or has threatened them with annihilation."

He frowned in order not to smile. "Anything else?"

She gave him a wicked smile. "I also know what your look of intense spiritual regard means," she murmured.

He blushed.

This conversation was as much a revelation of herself as of him. He stared at her with genuine affection and pride. Although he

was made uncomfortable by it, he liked her honesty, her insight into character and sense of humour.

Above all, there was a quality of rest about her which filled him with a tranquillity he had experienced with no one before. This was translated in terms of her capacity of enjoying her thoughts, her ability to be quiet and not feel bored, her eye for pretty things and things with style. He discovered to his surprise that she had breeding, that she was refined! But, after all, he was not really surprised.

Once they went to listen to a park band, which he enjoyed thoroughly. It made no difference to him that there were only three voices in the orchestra, predominantly brass, that they played hymns and military marches in precisely similar tempo and style; he enjoyed it because he mostly liked familiar things, in songs and in jokes, because the music had powers of association. All the time she laughed when he laughed, clapped when he did, gave him moral support and entered into his feelings with loyal warmth. He discovered that at the end of the concert, and said, "You must feel very bored with all this indifferent stuff. Let's go somewhere else." But he knew that she was genuinely happy that he was enjoying himself. He was touched by her unselfish regard, her loyalty. She was a very nice girl; no man could wish for a better friend.

At the end of the week he braced himself for a tussle. He half expected the same resistance, and this time was prepared to meet it with increasing determination. He was quite convinced that he had discovered a fine character, someone well worth rescuing apart from motives of humanity. But when he asked her to stay on he was delighted that she agreed far more readily than before.

He left her intensely happy and pleased with himself. He kept on thinking about her, picturing her in his mind. She was so lovely! With every meeting he had discovered new charms, new nuances of attractiveness in her. He was fascinated by the deep colours in her cheeks, pale gold and rose, by the changing colour in her eyes that were blue in shadow and grey in sunlight; he was enchanted by her figure, which had a sturdy grace, a controlled ease of movement, and he looked forward to some wonderful time in the future when he could possess all her beauty, her warmth. . . .

But above all, there were moments of unspeakable happiness, an elation such as he had never experienced before, a terrible and giddy élan that came over him when, in the midst of

laughter, she would give him a look which revealed in all its nakedness her worship, her devotion, her gratitude. At these times he felt tears in his eyes.

One quiet afternoon he was sitting in the mess-room, waiting for a call. It was a glorious day, the air was drowsy, and for a time he had watched the vain efforts of a fly to break through the invisible wall of glass that imprisoned him inexplicably. He opened the window and the faint breeze stirred some ferns on the window-ledge. He was in a mood to confide in someone and, feeling strangely proud and happy, he related his story to Bill Farson. He told it well and described his motives and longings clearly.

Bill had listened to him with baffling good-humour, and then, when the story was over, Boy said, "Well, what do you think of it, Bill? Wouldn't you have wanted to do the same?"

"I dunno," said Bill Farson slowly, and grinned.

"Don't you see, Bill. I really don't feel it any sacrifice at all. It makes me tremendously happy and proud to help the girl."

Bill went on grinning. At length he said, "Have you got a photograph of the girl?"

Boy gave it him.

"My, my," said Bill Farson, and his grin broadened. "She's a stunner. Say, ain't chivalry a wonderful thing? I sure would go for that stuff with a girl like her! You keep it up, Sonnie. You've got my blessing."

Boy snatched the photograph from his hand. He had been a fool to confide in him. Bill Farson was a shallow, crude-minded youth who had nothing in common with him really. But he was strangely upset all the same.

He was so angry with Bill that he hardly said a word to him for the rest of the afternoon. Bill scoffed at him. In desperation Boy sought someone else to confide in. He could think of no one except Neil Murray. Ross Haines' conventionality ruled him out, and he distrusted Stavenden's extravagant and infantile intellectualism. Melville, too, was deeply 'religious' and had ineradicable prejudices. Murray seemed the only man, and yet he made Boy feel uneasy. He had never really grown to understand him, conquered his reserve.

He was sitting at his table and writing when Boy sat down in a chair beside him and said, "Busy?"

"Yes."

"Listen, Neil. I've got something on my mind. I want to ask your opinion. It's a personal matter. Do you mind?"

"Oh, all right," said Murray, and put his pen down. He seemed to dislike personal confidences and heart-to-heart chats, knowing that advice sought was never acted upon unless it was in accord with predetermined plans.

"First of all," said Boy, "I want to ask your opinion about one or two things." He flushed, stung by Murray's cold manner.

"Well, go ahead."

"Do you believe that it is possible for a girl who has departed from conventional—morality—I mean——"

"Do you mean an adulteress?"

"No. The other sort . . . you know . . ."

"I suppose you mean a prostitute. Why the hell don't you say so?"

Boy was tongue-tied a moment. "Do you believe it possible for such a girl to reform her way of life?"

"What do you mean by 'reform'? Are you implying moral reform?"

"Not in this case. This girl seems to be entirely the victim of circumstance," said Boy hastily.

"Well, doesn't that answer your question? Remove the circumstance and the girl would return to a normal way of sexual behaviour."

"I suppose you're right. I take it that you agree that women do turn to that life as a result of circumstance rather than—shall we say, viciousness."

"Of course."

"Have you known cases where the reversion to a normal way of life became—I mean, have many girls given up the life, and did it last?"

"Very seldom in this country, but it has been known to happen. On the other hand, in Russia, I believe, they have been highly successful."

"Yes, I heard about it somewhere. But this particular case—you remember the girl we met some weeks ago."

Suddenly Murray understood. "Oh, Christ! Are you still harping on that! Good Lord, Hayward, why don't you leave well alone! What a fool I was to have taken you to that wretched brothel. Don't tell me you've been trying to reform the girl!"

"Listen, Neil, give me a chance to explain. You know nothing about it. This is different. I know it sounds incredible enough, but you simply don't understand what's been happening, what I've found out about her. She's really a perfectly nice girl, very sweet in fact, and when given a chance she——"

"Oh, God," said Murray impatiently, "*don't* tell me. Spare me the details of that horrible affair. *Why* don't you leave the poor kid alone? She's been knocked down by an express train and you offer the mangled body a bunch of violets. What in heaven's name do you think you can do? Why, it's a ruddy insult! Leave her alone!"

"Have you finished? Perhaps you might give me a chance to say something now."

"Have you got to?"

"Listen, you admit that such reforms are possible. You said yourself that there were cases in Russia where such reforms took place on a big scale."

"This isn't Russia."

"But are people so very different in this country? Isn't there a common humanity everywhere? Why can't it be done here——"

Murray got up. His irritation had suddenly changed to an inexplicable sternness of manner. "Look here, Hayward, perhaps I was a bit harsh just now. Please forgive me. I did not intend to hurt your feelings. It's a fault of mine which I've been trying to overcome. But do listen to me. I know you're a liberal-minded, sincere little chap, and you mean well, but for pity's sake don't start something you can't finish. These things are beyond our control. Don't get involved in her affairs, because you'll find it impossible to extricate yourself later on without blood and tears on both sides. Spare yourself that, but above all, spare her. *Hasn't she had enough?*"

Boy swallowed. He tried to say something, to offer an explanation, but he knew he could not convince this man. It was just a waste of time. What could he expect from him? Understanding? Or did he want—ever so faintly—a word of admiration for his high-minded behaviour? No! He had performed the noblest act of his life, he had drawn great happiness from it. Let that be enough. If they couldn't understand, they were the losers. From then on he would guard his act in secret, draw courage and elation from it as from a hidden source of inspiration. If they could not see he could only pity their blindness.

Murray watched him intently.

"Well?" he said at length, "are you going on with your great humane work?"

Boy said evenly, "I don't think I want to discuss it with you any further. Sorry to have troubled you."

For the first time Boy thought he saw a change in Murray's

manner. He looked rather abashed, even a trifle hurt. When he spoke he sounded even apologetic. "You know, Hayward, you're a good sort and I like you. I honestly didn't mean to put your back up."

"Oh, that's all right," said Boy cheerfully, "I've forgotten all about it, old chap." He gave a bright smile of complete forgiveness. He suspected that Murray was a little jealous of his popularity.

At that moment the alarm sounded, and Boy felt a charge run through him as though someone had pressed an electric contact. For just a second a hand seemed to brush away the summer light, but in a moment it was restored and he was moving quickly, mechanically with the others through the door.

All was ready for them on the flying-field. Although he had made a number now he still felt the same sense of extreme tension, delicate nerve fibres were on edge, senses keyed, voice heightened; yet as soon as he climbed into the aircraft he would feel coldly calm, have his feelings under iron control in the special way he had learned through experience. He had discovered that a man can stand so much and then he seems to grow a protective equipment, a censor band that checks the multitudinous fearful thoughts that disintegrate him at a crucial time. This protective equipment is every veteran soldier's safeguard against panic, like a wall between the control panel of the mind and the rushing, confusing, shouting thoughts that seek to undermine and throw a wrench in the smooth-running, delicately-balanced control. With Boy this protective wall was so sturdy now that he had become almost indifferent to the sound of the alarm, the sight of the swastika markings, the whine and explosion of the shells; these produced in him now a heightening of feeling so intense that it was like a new awakening, that he had hitherto walked and talked in his sleep, that only now was he fully conscious.

"Hayward," said Neil Murray at his elbow. "Keep your eye on Digby. It's his first trip. Nurse him round Tattenham Corner."

Boy nodded and gave his infectious grin.

"I say, Digby," he said, "you're going to guard my right, so follow instructions carefully."

"I'd rather like a crack at them myself, sir."

"You'll have plenty of time for that."

Boy's headphones cracked sharply as Stavenden's laugh came over.

"Listen, D'Artagnan. I've just tuned in to a Me squadron. I could hear them jabbering away. I'm trying to tune in to them. What's the German for skunk?"

"I don't know. Ask Neil."

Murray supplied the answer. "Try Stinktief."

"Hors t Du zu?" said Stavenden, tuning in frantically. A moment later he repeated it and added, "Antworte."

"Wer ist das?" came a Prussian voice. "Achtung, schwarze sechs. Bist du es?"

"Ja. Es ist schwarze sechs," said Stavenden. "Kannst Du ein Geheimnis bewahren? Es scheint, dass Hitler, Goering und Goebbels eine Wette abgeschlossen haben, wer es laenger in einer Stinktiefhoehle aushalten koenne. Goebbels ging zuerst hinein und kam nach einer Minute nach Luft schnappend heraus. Goering hielt es eineinhalb Minuten aus. Hitler ging hinein und nach einer Minute kam das Stinktief heraus. Das ist das Ende unserer Sendung. Sie hoeren jetzt Schallplatten. Die erste Nummer ist: You say the sweetest things, Baby. Gut? Ho, ho!"

"Andt now ve vill der merry games play," came back the Prussian.

"What did you tell them, Steve?" asked Boy, who thought he was missing all the fun.

"I told them that, if they could keep a secret, I would tell them a little story. It seems that Hitler and Goering and Goebbels made a bet as to who could stay longer in a skunk-hole. Goebbels went in first. Within a minute he came running out, gasping for air. Goering went next and stayed about a minute and a half. At last Hitler went in to bat. In less than a minute the skunk came running out. And now they want us to play games. Here we go."

They met nearly twenty thousand feet up, tooth to tooth, guns blazing. The blue tranquil sky was crossed and recrossed with rods of fire tipped with steel, a many thonged whip lashed and scalded German and British machines that turned and writhed, flashed on or crumpled under the scourge. Riding high, the chorus of the guns dinning its wrath, its sombre music reverberating above the thrashing airscrews, Boy saw the sky turn over,

the earth swaying and slipping, reeling and swinging to meet him as he nosed down smartly. He was wrestling in an aerial knot with a Me 110. Both held their fire, playing for position, answering each sky-embracing move with a counter move, a colossal shadow play, banking, turning, dipping and rolling out of range of the gun-sights, those nerve-centres that meant destruction.

The Me was an experienced hand, and after a little sparring Boy could hear another machine diving across and the sullen rattle of the cannon. He decided to take a chance.

He turned the stick sharply to the left and then to the right. His machine went into a vicious spin. Right—left—right—left—into a drunken, staggering fall, simulating a machine out of control. The Me 110 dived down to make the kill. He held his fire.

Right—left—right—left. Boy waited till the Me was a few hundred feet away, then nosed up and away, crossing on the other's tail. Simultaneously he pressed the gun-button, waiting for that inevitable moment when the machine would pass under his sights. It came and the long burst went in. A sudden small-pox plagued the body, the windscreen shattered into a thousand diamond-edged fragments of flying needle-sharp glass, thin whitish vapours poured in faint spurts. Boy went on diving. He gave the Me another short burst that crushed the rudder as though a giant rat had gnawed it. The Me went down in a long whistling wail, taking a header into the grey sea.

"... that doth change, but doth suffer a sea change, into something rich and strange . . . pearls that were his eyes . . ." thought Boy. "Come on, you super-men, you master-folk. There goes Siegfried. The sky's not big enough for both of us. Your moustache is singed, I can smell it."

His practised eye swept the horizon and, ignoring a dog-fight to the north, he shot off to intercept a bomber, a big, clumsy, pathetic panjandrum these days. Not one of them in ten had broken past the fire-steel defence of the British squadrons, yet they continued to come like cattle to the slaughter, trying to wear down by sheer weight of numbers the fury of the fighter aircraft. Boy did not care for the slaughter. He preferred one of those new Me 110s that put up a good show. To him it was a duty visit. They did not last long, these blundering, helpless, tragi-comic monsters who had terrorized open cities too long in the past.

Boy's approach obviously scared the crew, and he saw the

machine turn away and make for home. Boy swept in to attack, holding his fire and weaving, ignoring the attack of the rear gunner. He wanted to try an experiment that had been on his mind for some time.

Instead of diving on the broad helpless back of the bomber, he came in low. As he drew near he gave the rear gunner a short, bitter burst that silenced him.

The bomber tried to climb. The crew seemed quite panicked, because no one had the presence of mind to unload the bombs. So far so good. At that moment he had the bomber at his mercy, but he still held his fire. He crossed it twice, heading it off, then nosed in and began to nibble at the left wing. His raking fire cut a piece clean off. The bomber began to lose height rapidly. Boy kept up a steady pace side by side and waited for another chance at the wing, which he bit off neatly. The bomber staggered and then slowed, helplessly began to roll. Boy drew his machine away and then, at about ten thousand feet, nosed down and shut off his engine, dropping into a slow dive. As the bomber rolled over and over it exposed its broad belly. Boy fired leisurely into the bomb-rack. His bullets searched amongst the eggs, cracking and crushing them until he found the detonator. The bomber disintegrated. Although Boy was prepared for the explosion, the fury which he had released stunned him. For nearly a minute after he thought that he had got caught in a church belfry where a hundred bronze gongs declaimed judgment day.

He flew on thoughtfully. It was his seventh bomber, but only twice had he found the vital detonator in the bomb-rack; once by sheer luck in his first trip, now by careful strategy. It was a delicate operation dependent as much on luck as on judgment. He was highly elated with his success. He wanted to put a certain plan into operation which he had tentatively discussed with Murray and Ross Haines. Haines thought it impracticable, but was always willing to try anything. Murray, too, was sceptical, and refused to give permission to carry it out until he had investigated the chances involved. Farson would have gone ahead without instructions, but Boy had better sense; he recognized clearly the great risk involved in putting this plan into operation which would revolutionize one aspect of aerial tactics, but he had made Murray promise to give him the chance of being the first to try it.

He had collected some useful data on this trip and went over in his mind the strategy employed. It had taken him less than

three seconds of searching fire to feel out and ignite the detonator. As he thought and planned he automatically continued to search the horizon.

After a short time he recognized an enemy machine heading for the French coast. He made a quick calculation. If he followed the normal plan of climbing and diving in the atergo method the chances were that the enemy machine—a Me 109—would have time to escape. He had to take a chance.

He swung his aircraft in a sharp turn and hurried to cut it off. He was spotted as he expected to be, but the chance had to be taken. The enemy machine, instead of engaging him, turned and ran before the sweeping approach. This was most unusual and unlike the Germans, but perhaps the squadron had had a severe beating and the flier had temporarily lost his nerve.

Boy opened his engine out at full pressure and began to chase it, waiting for the inevitable moment when he would pin it in his gun-sight. It danced and bobbed four hundred yards ahead, evading with a skilful movement. Boy angled for it, his hand moving the stick with infinitely gentle, almost imperceptible, touches. He felt quite comfortable, cheerful and even a bit sorry for the nerve-racked foe.

Four . . . three hundred yards, but the damned thing was still bobbing disconcertingly. It had flashed for an instant in his sights and he had instantaneously pressed the gun-button, but his fire had merely scratched a wing. Two hundred yards now . . . he could see it plainly, any moment now he would get point-blank range and all the aerial pyrotechnics of evasion would avail it nothing.

At that moment there was a shrill swish and an instrument on his dashboard exploded. His wing trembled and a little tongue of flame crept lazily along his fuselage. A large cloud embraced him, and a moment later he felt a cold wind on his face. Instinctively his hand jerked the stick back.

He cursed ruefully as he plunged his blazing machine against the wind-current. Fancy being caught napping like that. These damned Nazis were up to their tricks again, sending a man out as a decoy. He slanted his aircraft, ignoring the greenish flames that he was determined would be out in a moment, and glanced back at the pursuing plane. He wrestled with wind and fire, but it looked more than likely that it would spread. His head was full of strange discordant thoughts, the control panel had been broken into by fevered images, a rod of fire, a broken-nosed mask, a window starred with frost, unaccountable memories and gibbering spectres

of childhood. He saw his burst glove in a trance. Was there a large beetle crawling across his eyes? No, smoke. How foul was the sharp taste of petrol fumes commingled with cordite. He retched. To-morrow a sea-change into something rich and strange. Per ardua ad astra and to hell with the stinktier. To-morrow and to sorrow. Friends and relations, on week-end vacations. A schoolmaster peered out under a black cap, a gun was drawn from under a black gown. He heard the crash and the report of the gun. Gentle Jesu, is this the end?

How tight these straps! He was hanging from them upside down, now he was propelled in the cockpit like water slung in a bottle, the earth was pitted with deep ditches, rocking and rocking and rocking mother-earth, cradle. Oh, mother. So this was what it was like, was like, was. Mother, this was what it was like. Damn, damn, *damn. I won't die . . . I won't.* Death is a thorn, a broken finger-nail, a delicate nerve-thread snapped, a little yell, a puppy squealing under a jack-boot. Can you hear your son crying in the dark fire, coughing out his prayer, spitting out swear-words and little-boy obscenities whilst his heart suffocates with longing? Little mice have gnawed away his engine.

Worst of all was the silence. His little engine had conked out. He could hear the silence. He listened to it, he fought against it as it enclosed him. Down, down in silence. Trapped in the silence. He fought against it. His hands feverishly swept the dashboard like a woman stroking a beloved familiar face in a coffin. He pressed and turned, pulled. There was a little fitful response, a loose contact made, light flickered on and off. What has happened to the summer? It was washed away into some dark vault.

No, it was no good. He must fight back against the silence. This was his enemy, his real enemy. It was a gaol, and he tore with his hands frantically at the chains that encircled him. There, there, *there!* Now, jump for it!

Too fast! Too fast, fool. There's a rip-cord, don't forget. A jerk at his shoulders, the earth spun and heaved, rolled out before him faster and faster. The parachute flowered. He was sailing down before the gentle wind, rolling and swinging. Oh, Jesu, look at that smash that might have been. That twisted cage of fiery steel. Oh, blessed mother, how sweet is the air. Four white shepherds sail in the sky.

He fell and rolled over once, twice, three times. When they disentangled him from his parachute they were surprised that he was laughing.

"Are you all right, sir?" said the small gentleman in the dust-grey coat. Why did he wear a coat in such weather?

"Yes, yes. Absolutely fine."

"You are an R.A.F. officer, sir?" said the small gentleman cautiously.

"No, sir. I'm no officer. I'm the angel of peace alighting on a visit of diplomatic importance."

"Yes, sir. Very amusing, sir. May I congratulate you on your escape, sir? My name is Maynard, and I am the proprietor of this flower-garden. This is my wife, this is my son, these men are my employees. This, sir, is the greenhouse you missed by a yard. A very lucky escape."

Boy shook hands with each of the people in turn who offered him cigarettes, a cup of tea—but he could not wait—and the use of their telephone. He got through to the base and reported what had happened. In a minute he was in touch with Murray.

"Yes, yes, I'm all right," he said, and then added, "I think so," because he suddenly felt very faint and sick.

"Okay, Hayward. Tell me where you are and I'll send a car right away."

"Where I am?" said Boy vaguely.

"Yes. What county?"

"Oh, just a moment. I haven't the foggiest notion. I feel sick, Neil. Sick and so happy I could kiss your ugly mug."

"All right, D'Artagnan," said Murray good-humouredly, "you shall. I'll pick you up myself if you'll give the exact address."

But Boy had fainted.

The doctor was saying, "... apart from that. But he'll do nicely after a rest."

Boy spluttered and pushed away the cup. "It's—hot."

"Is it too hot?" said Murray, and tasted the tea. "Scalding. Well, never mind. Can you get up?"

"No," said Boy. "Can't I stay here a bit?"

"Come on. Try to get up," said Murray.

"All right," said Boy.

"Leave him alone," said Murray to the small gentleman's wife. "He can get up himself."

"Yes, leave me alone," said Boy. "I'm sorry if I sound a bit rude," he muttered.

"Oh, that's all right, dear," said the small gentleman's wife agitatedly.

They all watched the two go out and get into the car.

"Thank you for your hospitality," said Murray.

"Oh, yes, thanks a lot," said Boy.

There was a mixed chorus, "You're welcome."

"I'll drop in again one day," stammered Boy, and laughed helplessly.

They tried to laugh but failed.

"Doctor says you're all right," said Murray. "How do you feel?"

"Fine. Absolutely wonderful."

"That's grand. Now, old chap, how about driving me back to the base?"

"Oh, no! I couldn't!"

"But you're all right, you know."

"I know, but I simply couldn't."

"Come on. Try."

"Oh, Neil, I couldn't touch the starter. I couldn't, couldn't."

"Come on, old son. Do me a favour and try. Look, they're all watching."

"I—I'll smash into something."

"Of course you won't."

"I will."

"All right, then. Just start the engine and I'll steer for you."

"Promise?"

"On my oath."

"All right, if you really promise."

Boy started the engine. There was a grinding of gears and it stalled.

"Oh, I can't. I can't. Don't make me, Neil. I can't, I tell you."

He tried again, and this time the car moved forward.

"Steer for me, Neil. You promised."

"I've got an eye on you. Don't worry."

"Neil . . . we're going to run into that car."

"Keep going. I'll take over for you when you have to pass it."

"Look! Christ, we nearly smashed into it. You *promised!*"

"But there was no need. You're doing fine."

"I'm not. I—I haven't any control. It's running away with me, Neil. Do take over. Now. Now."

"Now, old chap, you wouldn't like to get me smashed up, would you?"

At last Boy pulled up to the side of the road.

"I can't."

"Try."

"No. Don't make me."

"But you were doing fine. Come on."

"I was careering from side to side. I'd have smashed up."

"What on earth are you talking about? Trying to tell me you can't drive a baby engine like this? Do have another shot, old chap. Come on now. Do me a favour."

A voice near them said sharply, "Disgusting, I call it. Saw it with my own eyes. Young pups gallivanting about the road dead drunk."

A tall, rangy man in a bowler hat marched past indignantly laying down the law to another man in a smoke-blue suit who had a big gold watch-chain anchored about his ample middle.

Murray suddenly jumped out of the car and knocked the tall, rangy man from one side of the road to the other with a right-hand smash.

He returned to the car and lit a cigarette. Without a word he passed it to Boy, who smoked a few seconds in silence.

Neither of them said a word as Boy restarted the engine.

"I'll get her home all right," he muttered. "I'll get her back if it kills me."

10

HE tiptoed up behind her and put his hands over her eyes. "Who?" he said.

She started, trembled. Her voice was full of tenderness. She put her own hands over his and pressed them.

"The King of England."

"No."

"The Emperor of India."

"No."

"The Defender of the Free."

She turned and clung to him tightly.

"Oh, dear, I wasn't expecting you so soon." She wiped the tears from her eyes. He wiped his own.

"Frieda . . . onions!"

"Yes, my dear, you don't know the things I have to do for you. I cajoled, threatened, signed eleven forms, even offered to pay the final price."

"But, Frieda, how could you leave the front door, the back door and all the windows open. I've had a private tour of inspection and could have walked off with the entire bedroom suite."

"Oh, darling, it was naughty of you. I wanted to show you everything myself. I wanted to explain. Some of it isn't quite ready. Oh, you spoiled everything."

"But, honey, it's absolutely wizard. I love it all. Where on earth did you get your designs from?"

"Do you really like it?"

He was genuinely delighted with the job she had made of the little place. The parlour was in apple-green and brick-red; there were bronze candlesticks on the tiny sideboard, a blue china service lay amidst cut glass and silver and white linen on the French burntwood table; two high-backed armchairs of Tudor design stood on either side of the wide hearth and a white rug lay stretched at their feet; the window-seat was crowded with cushions, the covers of which she had embroidered herself. The little old-fashioned kitchen was spotless, his bedroom had an old-fashioned four-poster bed with curtains that she had sewn herself, a Venetian chest, a cane armchair and a bookcase of teak; her own bedroom had a couch and glass-topped dressing-table and a wardrobe with mirror-doors. There were pots of ferns and glass vases full of chrysanthemums, dahlias, anemones and roses everywhere, their profusion matched by their colour harmonies.

"I really don't know how you managed it on the money."

He was taken aback by the work she must have put into it; the hunting for the right piece of material, the glassware and furniture; she must have ransacked all the antique shops and furnishing stores in the county.

Nearly two months had passed since that evening he had persuaded her to stay on at the hotel. At the end of the week he found that she accepted far more readily his offer for a further stay. On the following Sunday he was glad to find that she welcomed yet another week with touching delight and gratitude. She no longer found it at all dull, as he visited her nearly every leave period. Meanwhile their friendship had ripened to a deep affection, a whole-hearted understanding. In spite of the fact that their relationship had not yet flowered to a full intimacy he was very happy with her. They went for long walks, picnicked, sometimes they fished in the lake or boated; on the rare occasions when he had managed to borrow Bill Farson's car they had gone for a long drive in the country, finishing up at some road-house or dropped in to town for a show and a dance. All the time he watched her, secretly cherishing an ideal happiness as he saw the change that gradually came over her. He had watched her eyes, saw the strained look fade and a new repose alight in them; her

secret humility that had shocked him on the evening after their first dance had changed to a deep graciousness, poise; her pride had been restored, and his genuine concern and affection for her had given her back a great deal of courage and self-respect. He remembered that when he had finally suggested that they should take a small furnished cottage she had flung her arms round him, weeping with happiness. To her it was the consummation of happiness, a token of his devotion to her. Throughout their friendship she had never made any demands, indeed her gratitude sometimes embarrassed him; she had accepted his every help with a touching delight that increased on every occasion. When he had finally proposed setting up a home for her she made one admission that brought tears to his eyes. She told him that she had gradually become afraid, as time passed, that he would become tired of his friendship which was not on the normal basis of a man and his sweetheart, and that she had now become so accustomed to this new life that the thought of returning to the old had become increasingly bitter to her, until one day she discovered that should she ever be compelled to go back to her old way of life she would suffer the same torment and conflict as on the first night of initiation, "a descent into a cold darkness" as she said.

He then knew that the wounded spirit had healed and was passing into a phase of convalescence. He himself was rewarded amply by the thrill of sheer creativeness, of resurrection of her spirit; he felt tears of a happiness he had never known before at this task of healing; he was doctor and nurse combined, she was his patient and his Pygmalion; there was a crystallization of all his ideals in this labour of mercy and love, the cause for which he was fighting in a bitter daily struggle became corollated in this work of restoration of one of the tragic victims of the enemy; it was an experience at once beautiful and ennobling. His whole ardent youth, his idealism, his sense of chivalry and justice took on a practical meaning, a reality; his happiness with her was beyond the mere romantic sensualism of a boy and girl; it was a relationship based on pity and the passion of a love that forgave all, understood all; it was part of the baptism of fire and salvation of the times; his experiences at the front of battle had opened his eyes and soul to a profounder pity and understanding, as though the secret places of the heart, with all their resources of courage and sustaining love and sensitiveness, all their pain and weakness, were revealed to him by a terrifying rushlight. His character had grown and broadened more in a week than during his whole twenty odd years of sheltered life; he felt himself finally

resolved in purpose and in courage; he felt proof against cynicism and 'worldliness', such as Murray's. There it was—in a word—for humanity's sake he had destroyed, for humanity's sake he had saved; a simple resolution and a unity of opposites.

As he bent down to kiss her he felt immensely strong in his faith, capable of anything, any sacrifice, any task.

How lovely she was! He saw her each day with new eyes, their briefest parting seemed too long, and each time they met their attraction, through their fuller understanding and devotion, grew in strength and their parting more difficult. He ached to take her in his arms, his whole body trembled at a touch, a smile; with each glance they seemed to rediscover one another. Even the tradition of reserve that had made humorous play of wooing only heightened the powerful surge of feeling he experienced in her presence.

As she took him out of the kitchen and they strolled up the small garden that had been dedicated to apple and plum trees and vegetable beds and the like, he watched the soft grace of her movements, the glow in her eyes, the bloom on her cheeks with a deep satisfaction. There were one or two chicken runs, strawberry beds and a fat goose in his own private pen, a cockerel perched on the tiny greenhouse. He was pleased at the picture of this background for her; she lived a creative and satisfying life surrounded by all these growing things, her manner had become more gracious, her movements softer, and her vitality shone through her appearance of constant repose; she had grown in health and attractiveness physically, her hips seemed more rounded, her bosom more deep and beautiful, her hair shone like silk.

He passed all the appropriate comments whilst she threw bits of bread and corn to the chickens. One of the chicks was very weak, and she picked him up gently, moistened the bread in her mouth and held him up so that he could peck at it from her lips; its thin delicate neck was so fragile and veined that it looked unable to support the tiny head. She nursed him sorrowfully.

"It would be nice if you would feed me that way."

She saw in that another meaning. "Are you hungry?"

"Just to look at you makes me so," he said lightly.

"But are you, dear?"

"Well, not just at the moment."

"I'll make an early lunch. What would you like?"

"Oh, anything."

"Darling, to-day you must be spoiled. I haven't seen you for

three whole days. We have salad, and then you can have some lamb cutlets, or if you'd like to wait a little while, some fried chicken."

"Oh, the chicken by all means."

"Well, then, you must go inside and read your paper whilst I get it ready. I must be alone."

"As you wish." He went into the parlour and made himself comfortable with the paper and some cigarettes which he found on a small occasional table, the American brand he liked. It was nice to be waited on by this charming girl, to feel her moving about him in the cottage or in the garden, to see her feminine things lying on the table, hanging on the hall-stand, her fresh scent clinging to a chiffon scarf that hung on a chair, to a book she had been reading.

Just as he buried himself happily in the paper he was disturbed by some frantic clucking. He took no notice for a moment, and then quite suddenly a thought struck him. He got up and went to the window. Hiding behind the curtains he watched her, unseen. She had taken a basin and a large kitchen knife under one arm and a chicken under the other. Placing the basin on an old garden table, she took the chicken by the throat and with lips set examined it with fearful solemnity. Then she set her teeth and, shutting her eyes tight, passed the knife quickly along its throat. As she held the knife the wrong way she passed the dull edge along the unhappy fowl's throat with no effect whatever. She opened her eyes, and there was such a horrified anticipation in them that he could hardly restrain his laughter. Her incredulity to find the bird unharmed, her despair at her failure after the effort it had cost her, proved too much for him.

He ran into the garden, roaring with laughter. He seized the chicken and threw it into its pen, where it squawked with fright for a full ten minutes, gathering its family about it for protection and comfort.

"Now wasn't that silly, Frieda my sweet. You know you haven't the slightest idea how to deal with such a situation."

She threw her arms round him, shamefaced.

"The butcher promised to call and he didn't. Oh, darling, I feel so upset."

"You shouldn't do it, you little chump. Even if you had managed to cut the unfortunate bird's throat you wouldn't know how to truss it, and you certainly wouldn't be able to eat a bite the whole day."

"But you said you wanted chicken."

"Oh, you're crazy. And I adore you! But, really, darling, how often have I to tell you that you shouldn't make these portentous sacrifices to satisfy my every whim. It's really quite embarrassing."

Her mouth quivered and she said, "You're so kind, Boy . . . and you've had nothing from me . . . nothing."

"You're an angel. Angels serve no utility purpose. A smile alone is reward enough for all the scars of battle and trials of mortal life," he said glibly, and then added seriously, "Buck up and look cheerful. Come and read me some of your unintelligible verse. I'm sick of reading about my heroism."

"First I must put the cutlets on the griller."

He helped her in the kitchen, in spite of which she finished in good time. Whilst the food was cooking they sat in the parlour and she read some of the French poets that she loved. Every now and then she translated.

He shook his head. "They sound far more comprehensible in French."

She became impatient. "Oh, you don't understand. You like everything to be on the ground. These poets light up a little patch of sky. There you have it! Real truth . . . like a whiff of perfume from beyond the stars."

He sat and stared at her with pleasure. What an incredible girl; at times the things she said seemed to illuminate a world which he had passed by blindly all his life. Out of her bitter life she had drawn a strain of beauty that no girl in her normal sheltered life could ever sense. A short while ago he would not have understood her, but since those July days when in an unbelievably lovely summer sky a nightmare storm had raged, he understood.

"It's funny, Frieda. A little while ago I would have laughed at such talk. I seemed to live all on the surface, I skated over life cutting pretty figures and making clever turns and . . . Well, read me a little more. Nothing really sad, just something that lights up a little patch of sky, as you say."

She turned the pages idly, dismissing at a glance what she didn't want.

"Do you always read like that?" he said, laughing. "Dipping into things." He preferred to read the pages as they were written in due numerical order.

She smiled. She told him that there was nothing very much she liked in most books. She never read a book through carefully, but sometimes she would come across a page or two or

just a line or a phrase which made her stop, and she would read and re-read it and let her mind dwell on it and absorb it. These selections were not usually of any recognized literary value, they were merely what she liked. She said that she made notes of them in her diary.

It was the first time he had heard of her diary and he felt a quickening of interest and in a way, he had to confess it, something rather less than interest and at the same time more sharp, a secret curiosity that made him slightly ashamed. What he wanted to ask her was the chronological field it covered, but he had not the heart for this question.

She had mentioned her diary a little hesitantly and at the same time challengingly, but his intuitive discretion made him avoid any further reference to it.

Whilst they had lunch the post came, and he brought a letter for her.

"What does it say, darling?" she asked.

"You'd better open it yourself."

It was a brief typewritten note and bore a London postmark. She read it carefully and looked very thoughtful for a moment.

"Not bad news, Frieda?"

"No," she said.

He saw, however, that she seemed a little preoccupied throughout lunch. She did not show him the letter. She put it carefully into her handbag. Neither referred to it during lunch. He tried to be cheerful and to entertain her, he showered compliments for her salad, which was delicious with a very piquant wine-sauce and a colour scheme that in itself seemed to add flavour to the dish.

Over coffee she said, "Would you mind if I left you for a short while to phone up from the post office? It might take a little time because of the priority calls to London."

"Of course not. Go ahead."

He wondered what was in the letter. He felt a little surprised that she had not asked him to accompany her and, in spite of himself, felt a vague suspicion. On the other hand she had invited him to open the letter for her. . . . Still, having read it she did not mention its contents, although she knew he was interested in anything that concerned her.

"Darling," she said, "perhaps I'll tell you a little later what is in the letter, but not now, if you don't mind."

He flushed at the ease with which she read his thoughts; he felt naïve and even a little foolish.

Quite unjustly he felt rather annoyed with her. "Now, why on earth say that?" he said, unable to keep the irritation from his voice. "I didn't ask you what was in the letter." Then as he saw how his tone cut her, he added hastily, "I mean, darling, that you mustn't feel obliged to show me your letters. Lord, everyone's entitled to his privacy; I'd hate to think you feel obliged to account for everything."

She drew a breath and returned his warm smile.

"All right. I won't be very long. Don't come with me, dear, because it means hanging outside the cubicle for half an hour or even longer whilst they get the call through. What will you do? Can I——"

"No, you can do nothing more for me. I've had enough to eat and drink, I've got cigarettes and a new home to explore. Heavens, I can look after myself for an hour, my precious. You run along." He found he had to take this firm stand.

"All right, darling," she said, smiling. "Be independent—if you can!"

It was the first time she had flirted with him and it made him happy.

She waved to him from the gate and again from the top of the road. He was left alone in possession of the little home. He browsed around, examining in greater detail the arrangements she had made, and with the leisure he found on his hands he began to absorb himself in the atmosphere of it. There was no doubt about it, the place was so clean it shone, and her soft scent seemed to cling to everything.

Instinctively he went up to her room. He touched her couch, ran his hands along the soft aired sheets and pillows. He found a lace night-dress tucked between the latter, and held it up to his cheek and lips, seeing his fingers through the delicate material. He opened her wardrobe curiously. He had wondered what to give her in the way of clothes; she seemed to have so many, but then a young girl can never feel entirely satisfied even if a whole department store was put at her disposal. Yes, she seemed to have everything in profusion. Dresses and costumes for every sort of occasion. His heart beat more quickly as he found one dress wrapped in tissue-paper and laid aside. Before he unwrapped it he knew what it would be—the white crêpe romaine gown she had worn the night he had met her in town. She had put it aside with the intention of selling it or getting rid of it otherwise, with the clear motive of never wearing it in his presence.

He stood a moment, thinking. If only he could make some gesture in return to show her he understood, to show her how much her action meant to him. . . . As he pushed the dress back into its wrapper he disturbed a winter coat and a large leather-bound note-book fell out of the side pocket. He was about to replace it when he saw a letter sticking out between the covers. Idly he glanced at the heading. He started. It was addressed to him.

For a moment he wondered whether to read it or not. He had not given her his address yet. She had as a result never written to him, and the few notes he had written her were mostly about their next meeting and an assurance that all was well with him. Often he had reproached himself for this reserve; although he felt quite at home with her now he had never been quite reconciled to the idea of an open liaison. He supposed that in time it would be different. At present, though, he did not like to have her communicating with him at the station . . . the boys were so crude-minded, and Murray knew her. There was just a possibility he might say something if he knew they lived together . . . it was a very slight possibility, Boy thought, but one never knew with Murray.

He decided that he might as well read the letter as it was addressed to him. He read:

MY DEAREST,

I am writing to you these thoughts of mine because my heart is overflowing with tenderness and I cannot keep it to myself. There is no one to whom I can write. My poor brothers are lost to me and my people are in a distant country joined with your own only in battle. Darling, although I cannot send this letter to you, I feel I must write it, as these things are a part of making love; one day, perhaps, you may allow me to write to you, and then I would feel sad if I cannot find one tiny love-letter to send you about how I first knew that I loved you.

Darling, love to me is something that is beyond the mere pain and delight of knowing another in tranquil and happy times. Such love as mine is a rebirth, an extreme agony of delight, such as God grant you will never understand, for it is like a man leaving prison, a child shutting its eyes tight and crying in darkness, and, opening them, to find the dawn light turning ghosts and ogres to clocks and flowers. I say God grant that you never know such love, because it springs from such suffering as I cannot wish on the perpetrator of my despair. And I am afraid, my dearest,

I am so afraid for it . . . because although it is as strong as an iron chain it is as fragile as some exquisite crystal that is smashed by the breath of a word misspoken. Oh, my heart, my love is so at your mercy; when you are sometimes bored with me I die a death, and a glance of criticism opens a wound. When you are with me I grudge the hours spent in sleep, and when you are away from me I long for sleep as for some oasis to a man dying of thirst.

What more can I say now . . . except that your strong wings may bear you in safety above every storm, that your armour of shining self-confidence may never grow dull, and that you may be spared a love such as mine.

FRIEDA.

The feelings Boy had were so exquisite that he felt tears in his eyes.

He went to the window. Everything had been quite clear a moment ago, now it was blurred. The pathos in the letter lay in the fact that she had never once mentioned her love for him, and he knew why: she did not want to be encouraged to love him. He had sensed that from the many occasions when he had to persuade her to continue to live with him, to be provided for by him. Repeatedly she had asked him the question: "But don't you see . . . it will make it so much harder . . . in the end." And always the words stung him with quickening pity and tenderness. In the end . . . No, no, he could not face the thought of what would happen to her then. But the words hurt him for another reason; there was a terrifying logic about them. In the end . . . either they must part, which would expose her to the same pressure of circumstance, or else he had to stand by her . . . to the end. But what, in God's name, did that mean? To the end?

This thought frightened him and he evaded it, locked it away in his mind.

He put the letter between the pages of the book. An entry caught his eye. It mentioned the name of a road-house where they had often had supper. A little farther down the page was his name. He turned to the first page. It was her diary. He shut it quickly and guiltily. He put it back into the side pocket of the swagger coat.

He went to the window and glanced down the long country road. What he was looking for was not clear to him for the moment. Then he was aware of the tremendous temptation.

No, she was nowhere in sight. These trunk calls took a long time these days. And he could easily . . . He despised the furtive base curiosity that drove him.

But something more than curiosity drove him; they were the thoughts that had preyed on him when he first planned to live with her. What did he know of her? What were the real effects on her character of the life she had led? The subject had always been taboo. Neither could have borne the thought of discussing the life she had led whilst the wounds were healing. But there were still so many things he must know, so many questions left unanswered. He had a right to know.

He picked up the book. Opening it at random he found his name mentioned . . . he began to read. . . .

Then quickly he turned back. He was drawn to the pages by a fascination that was remorseless. At length a wave of determination swept over him, his hands trembled. He turned to the first page.

II

THE diary had been begun on the seventh of March, 1940. The first entry read as follows:

March 7th. To-night I was standing on the steps of the R.P. Hotel. I had just left. I heard these words spoken by a young man to his girl. 'Just stay a while . . . go carefully . . . soon your eyes will get used to the darkness.'

My eyes have not yet got used to the darkness!

Boy looked up; the words, in all their naked simplicity of horror, burned into his brain. The handwriting itself was stark, angular as written with a pen gripped in a paralytic hold.

My eyes have not yet got used to the darkness!

No, I can feel the darkness steeped in me . . . but for the first two months I could not even see any outline. . . . I was in a fever . . . I had no sense of direction . . . I moved like a sleep-walker. A few things stand out. The first time it happened. He was a naval cadet; he was so young. He kept on saying to me, 'I'll give you a present. Do you understand? Why do you keep saying you won't. It's silly. A present for something you'll probably enjoy!' What lunatic logic. I must remember what it was

like. Yes . . . I was very nervous. It was the first time I did it, yet it was not the first time. Because for the next two weeks—*each time was the first because each time I died a death.*

This was underlined with a heavy slash of the pen.

March 11th. I must remember this room of mine in Jermyn Street. I must remember all its appliances. The things that hang behind the bathroom door, the antiseptics, the lysol, the sharp stink of vice, the surgical equipment of love!

I must remember because they represent the form of surgical love I professed.

I am utterly cold. Only to-night for the first time do I realize what it means. It is the punishment I inflict on them. This coldness is not only a coldness of the flesh. It is not only in the veiled touch, the dry kiss. It goes deeply into me and it reaches out to them in a frustrating hold. How stupid they are when they think they can possess me. I have never yet been possessed; I have never given myself to them. I have grown an armour of frigidity; it is invisible; it baffles them. Punishment, punishment! I shall inflict this punishment on all men.

March 23rd. Paula said, 'Morality! As though your body isn't your own to do as you please with. Some give it for love, others for money.'

I met Paula at the corner of J and P Street. At first I did not want to speak with her. I felt I was different from these girls. I don't like them. What have I in common with them except our common misery? But it was so lonely. I felt I had spoken to no one a lifetime. My tongue has become locked in my mouth.

She asked me if I wanted to have a coffee with her. I refused. She stood there talking to me about some 'friend'. Then she said to me suddenly with a kind of humble rough humour, 'I see you are new, dear. We girls ought to stick together.'

We girls! I shuddered.

March 24th. When you set off on a long walk you can go for miles and miles until you are so exhausted that you think it impossible that you can go another step . . . but somehow you find your legs move on automatically.

And so I find that it is March 24th and I am still alive.

March 25th. I am in a new world. But I still remember the old one. I am a woman, with all the fund of feelings, intuitions, delicate susceptibilities, manifestations of mind, senses, organs, all that complex, exquisitely co-ordinated equipment of living

organism that knows a multitudinous variety of reactions to an infinite number of influences; I have intimations of universal things; alone I am a sort of genius; in my womb sleeps immortality. Why, why, why in God's holy name, have I this one sterile function in this gaol?

I passed Paula a dozen times before she spoke to me. I didn't want to listen to her, but I was a little afraid that she might take offence if I didn't, and I'm terrified of these brawls that sometimes flare up. When they happen my blood runs cold.

I left her the first chance I had.

Some man who seemed so well-behaved when we first met—as soon as we were in my flat—began talking to me in that way at the top of his voice.

I could hardly control myself from flying at him. I said, 'I don't permit swearing.'

He said, 'I beg your pardon. It's nothing personal.'

I said, 'I'm sorry. I must ask you to go.'

He looked surprised. He said again, 'But please don't misunderstand. It's nothing personal.'

But I insisted he should go.

There are some things I could never do.

March 25th. I have learned at last to be master of any such situation. Men may be stronger, but a secret guilt always frightens them. I can stop them with a look now. I almost enjoy my sense of power in stopping them.

To-night one of them tried to play some game à la Marquis du Sade. I am to be a hunted creature and he is to trap and tame me.

I was frightened at first. Then I began to feel rather sorry for him, particularly when he looked so guilty about it.

'What is your vocation?' I asked him

'I am a solicitor's clerk,' he says reluctantly.

'You have mistaken your calling,' I say. 'You should be in the secret police.'

After that he does not want to play his game.

When he is gone I wonder if I will ever be successful. I have no taste for any of the technical perversions and I cannot accommodate myself to them; they agitate me, set my teeth on edge. On the whole—with this new power I have over men—it is not as bad as I had thought it might be.

March 26th. To-night I was snubbed, and I found it no longer gives me the shock of pain, the same shame and self-pity. He

was a little wispy man, and he swept me aside with a violent gesture of moral horror!

I said, 'Dear, dear! Do you prefer solitaire, then?'

The look he gave me showed that it went home, and I felt only contempt for him.

I think this of men. There are only two sorts, those that are afraid to do it and those that are not; I don't know which is the more vile.

I hesitate for half an hour to record this . . . it is the first time I have ever done it. To-night I earned seven pounds.

March 26th. To-day I have discovered an old truth. At a certain temperature water turns to ice. The change is a phenomenon produced by the difference of one degree in temperature. Suddenly, therefore, I feel differently, or I feel the same thing in a different way.

I am utterly exhausted with my despair, and it has become a foolish self-pity in my eyes. The act has become a purely mechanical thing, the faces I see in the darkness are no longer tormenting, contemptuous, lascivious; they are the faces of men or boys stamped with one haunted look, they are seeking someone . . . who? . . .

I have learned to understand deeply and to feel lightly.

I look at men with new eyes, I read accounts of events with new comprehension.

I can control my despair.

Paula asked me again this evening to have coffee with her. I hesitated, but could not refuse in the end. When she discovered I take sugar she offered me her ration. It would have been churlish to refuse, would it not? And then, having done so, what could I do but offer her some cigarettes a 'friend' gave me, as I hardly smoke.

Still no news from home. When will I hear about Emil, my sweet brother? . . . I feel even more deeply for him now that I understand suffering.

March 27th. To-night something strange happened. I was standing at the corner of J and C Street when Sandy the new policeman came up to me. He said, 'Look here, don't you think you've hung around long enough? You really ought to get along. I don't mind, but the inspector will be along some time and I'll catch it.'

I said, 'Why don't you go up Piccadilly? There are dozens of girls up there to warn off. Why pick on me?'

He said, 'I can't go up there. This is my beat.'

I said, 'And this is *my* beat, too.'

We laughed.

Yes, I laughed. Now I think of it my laughter makes me afraid. I am suddenly very sad to think I can laugh at it. It means I am getting hard.

Oh, God, don't let me get hard. Don't let me forget. Don't let me get hard, God. Don't let me. I don't mind how I suffer. I don't mind! I don't! Anything but that I should forget.

April 6th. Suddenly, when I believed I could suffer no more, when my armour has become complete, this has to happen.

It is an evening of sheer horror!

I meet him out under the arcade. He looks like a country farmer on a holiday. He talks in a brogue I can't understand.

In my room he tries to explain, but I don't understand—or I don't want to. Suddenly I know what it is. There is a strange monster who violates the dead. I am to lie still and stiff in a drawer which he has pulled out of a chest. This is to represent the coffin. He wants to chalk my face dead white.

Oh, God, the horror!

Can't they wait until I am dead!

Thank God, I don't let him. So far and no more. I can yield and yield until I think no one can go further, but it is I who can go no further or yield no more. Thank God, I don't let him.

April 7th. Paula says I was a fool, that he would have paid well. She tells me some of the things the girls have done. I can stand it no longer. Paula says I need a rest.

April 8th. I go to the country. The English country-side is very pretty in the spring. I talk war with Kelly, the manager. He used to be a sailor. His wife fears I may flirt with him. Bless her heart, she can have him and all the United States marines.

April 9th. I find some nice walks in the wood near by; there is a pretty lake. Suddenly I hear a bell. What is this strange phenomenon? At the hotel Kelly tells me that a monk had hung a bell in the hollowed trunk of a tree and it intones according to the play of the elements; when it is a warm, still day there is only the faintest music; when a storm blows there is a furious iron acclamation!

April 13th. I must go back. I am running short of money. My finances are in a mess again. I try to save, but I must keep up a decent flat, I must have clothes, I must have protection from

the police, I must have money in case anything happens to me. Must get back to town.

April 17th. I saw Dr. Gallagher to-day. Thank God, it was a false alarm.

April 19th. Took the evening off with Paula, went to see a play. Had dinner at the S. Quite a jolly time. Met some subalterns who wanted to see us home!

April 22nd. No, there is no end to it.

I got the news that would have meant suicide a month or two ago. Poor Emil died in camp at Dachau. 'Heart failure.' Letter via Sweden from father. It took a month or two to reach me.

I daren't think of Emil. It breaks my heart. Poor dear sweet brave boy. I loved him best. How I loved him! My heart aches to think of it. I have not yet forgotten. It has shown me that. Thank God, I have not yet forgotten.

April 23rd. I must go back to the country. I can't afford it, but I must have a few days.

April 25th. It is pleasant and I have found a sort of peace. I sit for hours and gaze at the lake. I read one or two books and some continental papers. It passes the time. I seem to have developed my taste for reading. Suddenly I seem to understand. It is like learning to ride a bicycle. You try and try and keep falling off. Then out of thin air you have your balance and you sail along.

I read some of the books Emil loved.

April 28th. Have no money left. Opened purse to-day and found four and six. I am mad! I must get back to town! Borrow from Paula.

April 29th. Paula does more. She puts me in touch with Eddie. He's got nice manners, has Eddie. I borrow a fur from Jeannette. I get one or two jewels from Doreen. They let me keep half, though.

May 6th. Eddie through with me. Still, it was all right whilst it lasted. I have eighty pounds clear and my own fur. Now I can either take another rest or just peg along. I think it wisest to keep on in town. Maybe meet another Eddie. Never know your luck.

May 8th. Glad I stayed. Made fifteen pounds. Celebrated with Paula. Got a bit drunk and I told her my life-story. First time

I ever told anyone. Could only do it when drunk. Sorry I did. Paula said, 'It was a bit of luck for you in a way. If he hadn't gone for you he would not have felt sorry afterwards and given you your passport. You might have finished off with your brother.'

At the time I wanted to tear her eyes out. A bit of luck for me! Paula is a shallow girl; still she's good-natured, and we girls have to stick together. Had a whip round later to send poor Joan to the country. We never knew she was T.B. Poor girl, and lovely as a doll! If only I had her looks and my health! Perhaps Paula was right. If I hadn't taken it the hard way with that Gestapo swine I would never have broken down like that. What on earth did I do with the money he pushed into my hand?

May 10th. Went to bed crying like a fool because I was called a p. the first time in my life. Some crazy Salvation Army girl started offering prayers for me in the street. Oh, God! It still hurts, hurts. I never knew until that crazy girl started how much it still hurts! Oh, God, when will it end! I thought I had my armour proof by now, but no—it will never really be proof! Sometimes it suddenly pierces you like a splinter under the finger-nail. Oh, God, how it hurts! Please, God, let it stop hurting. Please, God, let me forget. Let me be hard. Please, God, let it stop hurting. Please, God, let it be anything but that sort of pain!

May 11th. I did not go out the whole of the evening. I could not face another evening like that Sunday. I read and read. I read so many books these days. I think of Emil. How he used to read those French poets to me. His soft voice, his kind yet stern eyes, his strong yet . . . No, I can write no more.

May 15th. A strange and exciting evening! I started off on the wrong foot as soon as I was in the street. I saw an officer of the British Luftwaffe. He walked in a way which I should have known meant he was looking after his own business. What a man that was! He looks neither to right nor left and people make way for him. Like a fool I began to talk to him. I don't know . . . there was something about him that was interesting to me.

He shook his head and walked on with that swinging soldier's stride. I kept on at him. I must have been mad!

But it was no good. He left me. I was just turning away when I felt that damned policewoman take me by the arm.

What a thwarted hatred, what malice in that face, in that voice. How I hate these devil women! They are not of my sex! A policeman I always know how to deal with; you always know where you are with them. But these 'women'!

'You come with me,' she said, 'I saw you speak to that officer. You are charged with accosting a man.'

I try to break loose. I almost scream. I am terrified. It has never happened before. My God, they'll deport me. Or send me to some camp for the duration of the war. I feel faint.

My protests are no good, of course. She is beginning to drag me off. If I resist it will be worse than useless.

Suddenly I hear the officer's voice. He says, 'Take your arm off this lady.'

We are both speechless a moment. Then the policewoman says, 'Do you know this woman?'

I cry out, 'Oh, George, tell her that you know me. She wants to charge me!'

'Of course I know her. Don't you think I can recognize my sister?'

We are both dumbfounded. The policewoman tries to speak. He grabs me by the arm and we walk off. I feel as though I'm in a dream. I don't know what to say, I'm so relieved. I feel faint after it all. I ask him to come up just for a drink. I don't know how to thank him.

I sit down on a pouffe and he lolls on the bed. He asks me a lot of questions, and I answer in a soft, weak sort of voice. What an iron there is in that man! His eyes either pierce you or look at something a thousand miles away. I tell him I am called Hilda, and he says I should call him Sinclair.

Boy suddenly started. He put the diary down a moment with a guilty look at the window. This reference to Murray was a shock, the meaning of which was not immediately clear to him. He began to read on intently.

We talk about the war. He asks me about Austria. I answer everything as best I can. Then he is silent. I sit and look at him with a strange patience, like a pet dog. I feel a fool. But I can't help it. The man moves me in a strange way. I try to ask him what is in my mind all the time.

'Why did you say I was your—sister?'

He says to me in that slow voice that seems to be joking in a grim way, 'My sister in misfortune. My sister in diabolism. We are both of the same species, don't you think. We shall both

come out of this with unclean hands.'

I catch the word 'diabolism'. I ask him, 'Are you religious?' He just laughs.

I say seriously, 'But don't you believe in God?'

'I believe in Him, but I can't forgive Him.'

We talk. God, how we talk! I tell him what happened to me in Austria. He listens without saying a word. I expect some word of sympathy, of encouragement. He says, 'I can only offer you the blood of your countrymen.' We talk till the early hours of the morning.

He picked up one of my books, the Rimbaud, and reads me some of it. I cry, it is so painful and so sweet. My heart aches as it did when Emil read to me.

At last he gets up to go. I make him an early breakfast or late supper. I can't find enough to do for him. But it is useless. I am cut to the heart. He hardly sees it. He cannot forget what I have become. At last he says good-bye. I am absolutely broken. I ask him if he will ever call on me again. He says, 'I'll see you again one day.'

May 16th. An interesting and profitable day. I had a call from a Mrs. Lawrence, the girls call her Stephanie, and she runs a very select place in J. St. with Charles. She says she had a talk with 'Mr. Sinclair', whom she likes very much it seems. (He seems to know most people, does my British Luftwaffe officer.) He told her about my little trouble. She has made me an offer.

She wants to take me in. She has some very select clients, a very reliable type. Everything above board. She offers me fifty per cent; twenty-five will go to her and twenty-five to Charles. What does it amount to? She says she can guarantee me protection from the police. This, of course, is essential. Then there is health insurance. She can cut down my overhead expenses, too—I would not need such an expensive flat. She can even lend me jewellery and furs on special occasions, at low hire rates. She promises to keep my books in order for me.

It sounds a good thing to me. I badly need someone to handle my business affairs. I get into hopeless muddles. I wish I was the hard mercenary type. I can never make a proper bargain. . . . After all these months, the question of terms always sets my teeth on edge. For the sake of this little shred of self-respect, I say yes.

May 20th. It seems to work very well. I make less, but somehow I save more. My overheads are much lower.

I met Eddie again. He sometimes comes to the club, I hear. He says he was looking for me. He tells me some interesting things about the situation in France. Poor France! I ask him if it will happen here. He says, No.

I believe him. My Mr. Sinclair is fighting in France. My heart fills with pity and thanksgiving and a sentimental pride for my Mr. Sinclair; he alone will stop them.

May 23rd. If only I could forget him. . . . If only I had met him before. . . . If only I had met him some other way. . . . If only he would let me hear just a word. . . . If only I could tear this thing out of my aching flesh. . . . If only I could forget him. . . .

May 25th. The girls say, 'Poor Hilda, she's in a bad way.' I have never known what love really is till now. It gets worse and worse, this agony. If someone had told me two weeks ago that I would feel this way I would have laughed. It seems insane, but there it is. I thought I was proof against one sort of pain. . . . No, nothing is spared me.

June 3rd. Eddie dropped in to the club to-night. He was a little drunk and sentimental. He tells me how good it is to hear a German voice again. I insist I am Austrian. He laughs. He takes me up to the room and we have some more to drink. He tells me all his worries. I tell him all my worries. Neither of us listen to the other. We are both drunk. We cry.

Then he asks me to do the hardest thing yet. He wants me to nurse him on my lap, to be his mother to him. He asks me to repeat old German rhymes to him as his mother used to. Then I have to read him some old letters from his daughter. They are sweet letters. I can hardly control my voice. My heart is breaking with pity for myself and for him.

June 8th. I go to the same place in the country. I don't know why it is always the same place. Someone knows me there, I am not entirely with strangers. Kelly's old sea stories, the little lake that mesmerizes me with its peace, the wood alive with little streams. It was a mild pleasant day with just a faint breeze, and the bell in the old oak chimed deep and sad. I am beginning to forget my Mr. Sinclair, my Mr. Brother.

June 11th. Must go back to town. It has been very sweet, but there were moments when I could have plucked up courage to go into that little lake. . . . Sometimes, in the midst of peace, I remember things too clearly, too acutely. *Hell is not hell without the memory of the other world.*

Boy began to notice how the handwriting had changed. There were no more pointed, angular characters; they were formed with frail delicacy and smoothness.

June 19th. The panic is locked in the people's hearts. I see faces set and eyes intent on nothing. France is finished! America, however, seems to be even more terror-struck. She is thinking of leaving England to her fate, holding up vital supplies. What a horror has befallen this proud nation, this great, easy-going, self-confident, phlegmatic country that held the balance of power in the world, that was the natural arbitrator of international events from Vladivostok to the Argentine. I feel a great pity, but I am not afraid. Events have left me comparatively unmoved. The invasion of the Nazis is nothing new to me. What can they do to me? Will another Gestapo official detain me for questioning? This time I will not take it the hard way. . . .

I wonder if I will see my Mr. Sinclair again now. . . .

June 28th. Eddie says invasion is impossible. He has it direct from the authorities, of course. This invasion idea is just a scare. Eddie says, 'The British nafy vill safe us. Long liff the British nafy!'

But it will starve the whole of Europe to do it.

July 6th. Things are getting bad. Hardly anything to do. People are leaving town. Eddie left last week. He says there will be heavy raids and has gone to Cornwall. I haven't had a client the whole evening.

It gives me more time to read, to do the things I want. I heard a lovely concert on the radio. I sat all by myself in my room and listened to the end. Music does not tire me as it used to. I care nothing for waltzes any more. It has to be something by Mozart or Chopin. I feel intensely lonely. What can I do?

July 12th. Some of the girls have had a hard time lately. There's a new one called Jeannette, a starlight blonde, and hard as nails. The other day she bribed George to dope a client's drink. She cleaned up, but Stephanie was wild. That client will not come again.

The police are getting tough. Some of the service men have complained about the clubs. It looks rather bad at present.

July 16th. Thank heaven, I earned my first fiver for a week. Saved!

July 18th. What a night! What a piling of climax on climax!

I seem to have passed my whole life in review this night. I must write now whilst it is still fresh in my mind although it is after five in the morning and my head is throbbing and my hand trembling.

It began a little before midnight. I was sitting with Paula and we were complaining about the tough eggs that Charles is forced to bring into the club these nights. Some of these men are criminals, with prison records. Paula and I are annoyed. We are planning to get the girls to form a union! But it is too bad. Paula and I will have nothing to do with these men.

In the middle of our chat Stephanie comes up and says to me, 'An old friend of yours wants to see you, dear.'

'Not Eddie!' I say, but something in her voice makes me understand.

Yes, it is my Mr. Sinclair!

I go along and sit with him for a while. We are five. Paula, Stephanie, myself, Mr. Sinclair and a friend of his, a young Luftwaffe officer. I sit and dare not look him in the eye. He is very friendly, but he gives me no special look. I sit and pray that he won't ask me to go up to one of the rooms. I simply couldn't bear to do it. . . . No, not for all the money in London! Yet I long to be alone with him.

He has hardly changed. He has merely become more himself. France has not hurt him in a way that it shows. After a while my agitation leaves me. I sense the hopelessness of it all. He has no eyes for me. He is interested in what Stephanie tells him.

I feel I have been a fool. God, how dared I to hope for anything from him? What right have I now to love?

The despair that grips me is a waterless desert. But I control myself. I feel the wisdom of what he is doing. To encourage me would be to encourage a hopeless position. It is too late! I have made it too late, that Gestapo swine has made it too late, life has made it too late! Thank God he understands and is hard! It is the only way! If he encouraged me, added fuel to the fire in my heart, he would in time inflict a final hurt that I could not survive.

In spite of the bitterness of it I understand what he is doing. I had begun to learn to forget him. He has merely invoked memories. Soon he must leave me, and after a while I will forget entirely. That is how it should be—a clean break, like an operation—something ruthless but essentially kind, that hurts for the moment but will heal rapidly. I am glad that he has

the hardness to do it; I, myself, am always mastered by my senses.

That is how it happened. In half an hour I was resigned . . . and when it was his friend who took me up to one of the rooms I was filled with relief.

As for this friend of his I am a little surprised. He does not strike me as Sinclair's type, but I tried to be nice to him for Sinclair's sake and for the sake of all those boys at Dachau whom he is avenging. It made me tell him my story. When I finished he said nothing at all. I looked at him and I felt suddenly unhappy at the way he looked. He could not speak, poor boy, he was so overcome. How young he is!

And now for the horror that followed. I must get this down on paper, this above all, because this points the whole issue of what I have become, this plucks the last veil from my mind of what my life means.

It is late now, after three o'clock. Most of the clients have gone. Only a few of the girls remain. I am sitting with Paula at our table; we are thinking our thoughts aloud. She agrees with me that nothing else could have happened. There is a type of man who sometimes clings to some of the neurotic, half-crazy girls, who preys on them and lives by them, but, thank God, that is not for me. And Sinclair is not that sort of man. I pray for him that he should be safe and strong and one day mate with some woman who can understand his suffering without having suffered.

Then it happens. There is a frightful row. It flares up at the bar. A man shouting, a girl screaming, bottles crashing! What has happened? I sit shaking with fright. I have never known this sort of thing before. Paula has got up, and I can see my own fear reflected in her face. But this is something worse than usual, for Paula has had experience of these things and is not so easily frightened. What can it be? Paula says something, and suddenly I understand.

It is that bitch, Jeannette. She has doped somebody's drinks. Whom does she have to choose but Sonnie Crowley, the hardest egg in London, a criminal with a record of robbery with violence. The man is sub-human. He is hard as iron, violent, half-mad. Now she has made him beastly drunk and suddenly he understands how it happened.

There are three of them, Crowley and two thugs of his. I see it all and I cannot get up, I am paralysed. Crowley goes behind the bar and breaks a bottle over George's head. He falls bleeding.

Then he strikes Charles, who falls senseless, and begins to kick him in the stomach. All the time, you understand, he has Jeannette's arm gripped tight.

Suddenly he turns on her and pushes his face next to hers. The stream of filth that leaves his lips makes my stomach turn over. Then he twists her arms and gets her on the table. His thugs hold her legs and arms whilst Crowley, with the flat of his hand, beats her face to a mess of blood and quivering flesh. Her screams die as she faints.

Paula, all the time, is dragging at my wrist and screaming for me to come with her to help Jeannette. She has pluck has Paula! She flies at the men with a bottle in her hand. Of course it is worse than useless. One of them—I don't know if it is deliberate—has struck her in the breast. She falls and is breathless a moment, then she throws up.

The thug digs his foot into her side and spits.

Then they leave.

Some thoughts that come to me to-night. What am I? I am a slave. My body is detestable to me. If I were to gash it, violate it, I would be forced to get some sort of work which I am allowed to do in a foreign land. Scrub floors, wash out other people's filth, anything that is clean and requires courage. Will they let me starve in the streets?

What am I? I am a coward. I let them wound my sister before my eyes without raising a hand. Better to have been struck in the breast than to stand by, a slave to cowardice.

I saw the thug bend and spit on her. That is what I should have suffered.

July 20th. I have escaped to the country again. Yesterday I wandered in the country without tasting food all day. A sort of heaviness has come over me. I watch without seeing, I forget where I am, I shudder violently. It takes me half an hour to make up my mind to put a glass of water to my lips when I am thirsty.

July 21st. A day that was heaven!

I am walking in the country road. I have bought a bag of cherries, but of course I have forgotten to eat them. Suddenly a man's voice. I turn away, but even as I do so I seem to recognize him. Then I know who it is. It is the young friend of Sinclair, and I cannot control my delight. As he speaks to me I try to remember something he said—something which would show him

I have not forgotten him. I mention some dance band he seemed to like.

Why has he come to see me in the country? I remember he had left his watch in that room, and I had left a message to tell me where to send it. Obviously he need not have come all the way to the country to get his watch. He is interested in me. It is clear.

Within a little while I know that his interest is not professional. He has sought me out as a friend!

This is too incredible! This young boy in his new uniform, carefully shaved and washed, knows what I am and seeks me out as a friend! This innocent, this gladiator revered by the country, seeks me out, knowing what I am.

(The thug turned and spat on her.)

Within ten minutes he tells me his name, in an hour his whole history! Every time I rise to get something at table he jumps up. As soon as I sit he seats himself again!

I feel I must show him how much all this means to me, but how?

He has made my whole day alive with hope. I think it is a dream which cannot last. When I see him to the station he is silent and I fear his thoughts. Have I said something which I am unaware of? Have I really changed, forgotten?

I feel we have a certain fellow feeling in spite of everything. He is a boy, yes. But he has the safety of his country in his hands. He is considered man enough to be entrusted with that! And in spite of his innocence, the confidence that shines in everything he says, there is a strained expression in his eyes which I understand. Yes, there is a friend for me, a friend with a shining sword in this dream of mine.

Then he turns to me and says he wants to see me for the weekend . . . as a friend. He makes sure that I understand it is as a friend. . . . What am I to think?

July 22nd. What does it mean? Will he really come again?

I must write about him now whilst his picture is clear to me. I may never see him again. He is tall and very fair. When I think of him in his uniform I laugh. He is such a perfect Aryan type! He would be the white-headed boy of the Hitler Youth.

And he radiates confidence. That is why I feel so drawn to him. He may be a knight, but he is such a practical knight. The careful way he folds up the napkin after his lunch, his ability to be at rest inspires me with repose. He glows with health like a

young stallion at pasture; health shines in his eyes, and his look rests gently and clearly on me. He made me feel like a young lady! (*I have seen so many men look at me. . . . I thought I would never see such a look again.*)

* I no longer think of him as the friend of Sinclair.

July 23rd. I don't think he'll come. No, I'm sure he won't come. Nevertheless I saw a book in a second-hand shop, which I bought with the money I have put by for some stockings I badly need. I think it might please him, and if he likes it I will see if he will accept it from me as a small gift. It is the *Morte d'Arthur*. I do hope he'll like it.

I'm sure he won't come.

July 24th. I am writing this late at night. It has been a day of a sweet conflict such as I have never known.

First of all let me record it quite clearly. He came!

This is entirely incomprehensible. There was no reason for his coming. He is not smitten with some itch of desire. I could have recognized that immediately. He came as my friend. By the end of the day I had final proof of it.

I hardly know where to begin. Feelings and impressions pour from my mind. I don't know in what order to put them.

First of all the blessed oasis of such a friendship. . . . These months have been a lifetime in which I was lost. I have had to find my level with women whose only interest to me was in our common necessity, our common misfortune. I had learned to hate the face of respectable humanity and to fear it far more.

He knows what I am!

Why does he come to me to revive old wounds? to present mirages of the past?

First of all we played tennis. I told him I played well. When I stood on the court I almost fainted I was so nervous. What if I have forgotten . . . ? This is my constant fear . . . what if I have forgotten . . . ? When I speak to him I think of every word I utter . . . in case it reveals what I have become. . . .

But I did not forget. I played as I have never played in my life! At first I had no heart for it. I only wanted to amuse him. But when I began to feel that release . . . it was like wine, the energy that intoxicated me. Oh, God . . . the nostalgia . . . the smell of fresh-cut grass, the strong ease that came to me . . . I felt young! For an hour I forgot everything and remembered everything!

A score of impressions!

How thoughtful to select the Liebfraumilch . . . the clearness of his practical mind that can read maps, plan courses of action, know his direction in a flash . . . these things have always been so difficult to me. . . . How sure his hands are on the steering-wheel, how immaculate his judgment, how unobtrusive. . . . He is my guide. . . .

We dine . . . the waiter puts flowers on our table . . . he treats me all the time as though I am a friend of his sister. . . .

We dance . . . he holds me as though he's afraid I might break. What does it mean? Sometimes I think I shall burst unless I find out. . . . He has not mistaken me for someone else.

There is respect in every look, every touch . . . it is unbearable. He does not know how I suffer.

On the veranda whom do I meet but Eddie. He is tired of Cornwall, he is living in Maidenhead in anticipation of the air raids. He speaks to me in German. . . . I feel irritated, unhappy at the temptation . . . Eddie says he is lonely, he wants to show me a good time, and when Eddie says that he means it. If I go with him I can forget finance for a month. But suddenly Eddie makes me feel sick. . . . I get rid of him.

Boy . . . this is the first time I write his name . . . Boy has seen it, but he says nothing at all. I wish I knew what it meant. . . . He *knows*, but he pretends he doesn't. . . . Yet he seems quite sane. Obviously he is not. What a delicious insanity!

Oh, God, why did he say that to me after the dance! It hurt like birth must hurt. . . .

'Don't you see—as in the other thing—unless the girl is happy, too, it means nothing . . . it is false, cruel.'

God, what does it mean?

July 25th. I know what it means! I know what it means! I know what it means!

He told me, 'I want to make up for . . . helping in the work begun by that Gestapo agent.'

He! Helping in the work begun by the Gestapo official!
He! It is so absurd I can hardly believe it. But he did say it. It makes sense. Above all, it makes truth.

What have I done? Why did I give in to him? Why did I let my senses master me? Why did I give in? Why must I make it so hard for myself? Why am I such a coward? I am frightened. Happiness frightens me.

I must write and tell him I cannot any longer accept his offer. But I don't know where to send the letter.

Thank God, I don't know where to send that letter.

Suddenly I am tired. It has become unreal to me. . . . What must I do? I can only marvel that there is such a man . . . and a little ray of light that now must hurt my eyes so after all this time.

July 26th. Felt thoroughly unhappy and frightened this morning. What has happened to me? To stay on is silly. Now that he is not here it seems unreal. Better, far better, to leave and forget him. I had learned to become hard. In time I shall become completely indifferent. One can get used to anything. Prisoners in a chain gang become attached to their chains in time; they begin to signify a sort of security. If I don't go now my determination will become weaker, I shall become sensitive once more to the full pain and mortification. What have we in common? He is a respected man, his whole life before him; he moves in a circle that is enchanted with the magic of utter respectability; he feels a strange pity for me as a result of his ardent youthful idealism; it is wrong of me to take advantage of his sense of pity and romantic youth. It is all sheer sentimentalism; in time he will recognize it . . . and then, in God's name, what will become of me.

Go! go! go!

Before it is too late. . . .

July 27th. I have decided to go. I will leave him a letter. I phone Paula. She tells me the club has been closed down. She is on her own once more.

For a full ten seconds I say nothing. I will have to go back to *that* life. I will not even have the support of Stephanie. I will have to rely entirely on myself once more. The night . . . the solitude . . . the police . . . the meeting in darkness . . . the bitter contract. . . . What awaits me then? Who is he? What vice will he make naked? What will he want of me . . . ?

Go! go!

4 a.m. I feel like a small child in the darkness. I have not slept all night. I have less courage in the midst of these vile dreams. . . . Just enough courage to go . . . but there is a dragging thought that recurs like a toothache . . . Stay! Stay and see him once more . . . but this will do no good.

July 28th. To-day I had made all my preparations to go. My bag is packed. I have cancelled my room.

I had begun to write my letter to him . . .

This thought occurs to me: Why this haste? If you can't let him know he will waste a whole day travelling to the hotel; you would prevent him from making other arrangements for his brief leave period. It is not fair to him. Stay and see him once more . . . have courage enough to tell him. You have made up your mind, you can remain firm!

July 29th. He came . . . and I did not tell him. What was my excuse? He had bought me a little tennis outfit, 'suitable garments' as he told me, a blouse and knicks, and he has, of course, discovered that the Poincet family, a youthful couple—the husband was in the Alpine Corps—are interested in the sport, and he has arranged that we meet for the championship of the hotel to-morrow! I am to partner him, and even this vaguest and remotest of relationships seems delightful.

For an hour he has instructed me in the forearm drive, and I am obedient although I know a more telling stroke. He takes it all with such seriousness, even as he always talks so lightly of his mortal combats. How can I have the heart to tell him . . . for the sake of those dainty white shorts and the blouse I must stay!

He has a touch of bronze in his hair I had never noticed and little tufts of gold hair on the back of his fingers.

July 30th. It was delightful . . . and it makes me feel that I have lost my will, my courage.

First of all we met early. We neither could sleep and we were up at six. I heard him move in his room and we signalled to one another through the wall, I with my shoe and he with his racket. Although we had no code we understood instinctively and met in ten minutes in the lounge. What a lovely walk through the fields, with the grass cool and sparkling with dew! We held hands and I brushed my fingers on those little tufts of hair on the back of his hands. What didn't we talk about. . . . What nonsense it was!

To spend the day with him is to revive too many memories, to be young again. . . . I could not recognize myself. We had breakfast at a farm, and he talks to the workpeople as pleasantly as to the farmer. Everybody asks him about the war, about flying and how soon we will win, and he says simply, 'I don't know,' and listens modestly to the opinion of the farm-hand about what England must do!

He offers to pay for the breakfast, but they will not hear of it, so he insists on helping to stone a basin of raisins for the farmer's wife, who blushes all the time. He offers me a raisin, and I dare not take one because I will then finish them all.

By the time we go back to the hotel we are so hungry again that we shamefacedly have the hotel breakfast, too! We sit, blushing and laughing as though enjoying a delightful conspiracy! What is happening to me . . . ? I can hear my laughter and it is as I used to laugh at one time, freely and clearly, as though there is no remorseless pressure at the back of my mind! I feel my will falling from me, my courage slipping away . . . but I cannot resist him, his deep amused eyes that meet mine so often with such candid pleasure and innocence.

Later I show him my favourite walks, and laugh as I watch his expression when he hears the bell tolling in the wood. I tell him I can hear nothing . . . that it is his imagination, due to the special sense with which the truly noble and innocent are gifted, like Joan of Arc—voices from beyond, intimations of another world! And he blushes and presses my hand. A feeling too deep for words moves me.

He becomes embarrassed at the hint that I think him some sort of saint . . . and insists on investigating the 'phenomenon'. Of course he cannot find the bell, and so for the rest of the afternoon I ask him what his 'voices' are telling him and what work the 'harps' are playing!

After lunch he told me something about my Mr. Sinclair, whose first name I discover is Neil. I listen and I am surprised that I have no special feeling any more. . . .

Well, we play for the championship of the hotel and we beat the Poincet couple with ease. With us there is such harmony that I instinctively know what he wants me to do, where I should be. . . . I am his handmaiden, his collaborator, his partner. . . . He towers over me, he supports me, he adds to my strength . . . my feelings go out to him. How we beat the Poincets! They are frigidly polite at their disgrace and the husband refuses to converse with his wife, she has committed so many errors, poor girl! La France has suffered enough disgrace! How apologetic he is at his victory!

Afterwards this happens: We sit in the deck-chairs. It is evening now and I shiver slightly. Immediately he takes off his jacket and drapes it round me. It feels rough and smells of tobacco and I finger the 'wings' on the chest. . . . How can he do it?

His uniform, his King's uniform . . . to *me*! This is the moment he chooses to tell me that he has told Kelly that I shall require my room for yet another week.

August 3rd. I want to go . . . but I stay. I find an excuse. Every hour I think of yet another which seems the only genuine one. First I think: A week . . . just a little week . . . and then no more. Why must I grudge myself this brief candle-flame in the pit. . . . I have strength to go now. . . . I shall have strength still when this little week is finished. Then I think: these big daylight raids on London are terrible, they fill me with dread . . . my heart goes out to him in his bitter task. . . . Is he safe? . . . How will I know? . . . I must, *must* know. . . . If I leave now I shall be haunted for the rest of my life. . . .

I stay. . . .

August 6th. I have changed. . . . I knew it as soon as I saw him look at me. My heart gave a great plunge and I felt myself blush. How his eyes shone!

This day has been the best of all! I felt the agitation which moved him. He had such vitality in his voice, in every movement; it filled me with longing. . . . All day long his eyes were on me, everything he said was a caress, he touched me in a sensitive abashed way.

But this must take time. Unhappily I know it. The frigidity that had become my armour still encircles me, restrains me, makes my response mechanical.

To-night I summon the memory of his touch, his warm breath on my cheek when he whispered something to me, the little tufts of hair on the back of his fingers. . . . I am filled with tenderness.

August 7th. To-night when he left he told me quietly. 'Please, Frieda, do stay a little longer . . . you don't know how much it means to me.'

Of course I said, 'Yes.'

August 10th. The book falls unread from my hand although I had gone especially to the library for it. One does not want to read the most interesting book ever written when one is really alive. I feel this new life within me; I am aglow with the tenderest feelings. I do not wish for anything. The air tastes sweet, I can see an inner meaning in things I passed by a thousand times before, I feel tears in my eyes at my thoughts, I notice the exquisite movements of the curving wing-muscles of a thrush as

it sweeps low over the bushes; the *straightness* of trees, the *configuration* of skies and a thousand other *essences* of things. I summon up the memory of his vigorous body, his walk, his look that falls and breaks like a wave over my senses. . . . I shiver slightly.

When will it end? I am so cold . . . will my *senses* never be stirred again in that way? I feel tenderness . . . *tendresse* . . . as for my brother.

August 12th. In the midst of my sleep a violent alarm. It is like a buzzer in my head this intrusion; it sets my nerves jangling. Paula has phoned me. She wonders what has happened to me? Have I found someone? I answer briefly, nervously. She says she was worried about me. I reassure her all is well. I notice how harsh and abrupt her voice is, as I once knew it to be. . . .

August 14th. He is coming to see me to-morrow, and for the first time I begin to have a new fear. . . . Will he want me to stay on?

August 15th. As soon as I saw him I knew all would be well. He is as much in love with me as ever. What a glowing courtship that boy pursues, and the exquisite jest is that he does not know it. I do not flirt with him, I dare not encourage him yet. With all the discretion and delicacy I can I lead him towards other interests. It is I who has to take the initiative now . . . I who have to plan the day . . . plan it so that it is full of diversions. . . . We play tennis, go for a drive in the car until I know that even he is tired, see a film which is full of blood-and-thunder nonsense. He grumbles, 'I hardly had a chance to look at you all day, Frieda. You are an awful gadabout.'

When will I learn to feel again. . . . Oh, God, please let it end. . . . Have I to punish him, too, for what I became. . . .

August 16th. To-day he saw that I was worried by the letter I received from my furniture company, who demand to have their goods returned because I have not paid last month's instalment.

At last he persuades me to show him bills and receipts, contracts and bills of sale. I am afraid to do so as it will reveal the confusion in all my accounts. I keep bills I can pay, and those I cannot I mislay deliberately. Sometimes I think I am charged twice for the same account, but as my books are not in order I cannot find proper records, and to avoid trouble I pay. People often take advantage of my position; my landlord demands rent over and above his contract on flimsy pretexts, such as that the

value of the ground has gone up; I submit to this form of blackmail, for I have a terror of the courts and what might be said about me.

This financial problem is my constant fear, I get deeper and deeper involved in my confusion; a dozen times I try to put my accounts in order, and each time I only become more confused. The sight of unpaid bills frightens me each time I bring them out.

I watched him as he took the pile of papers, a pipe and a pencil. He was not the least perturbed by the confusion. He has a tremendous memory for figures, for dates, for sales; nothing confuses him; he asks me questions and has not to repeat his inquiry at any time. When I apologize from time to time for the trouble it is to him, he laughs and says that if ever I had to investigate the accounts of a Stock Exchange share-pusher my little trouble would be child's play. I watch the pile of papers sorted out, indexed, classified; I see him make calculations, notes; he discovers that a bill is mislaid and makes a note of it exactly, stating article, date, purchase; when a receipt has failed to arrive he knows about it; he knows where every record is and can put his hand on it immediately when he desires to confirm something. I watch the piles finally sorted out. In his neat, rounded writing that seems to run on wheels it is so impeccably formed, he draws up a balance sheet and tells me exactly how I stand. He has made full drafts of letters I have to write. He reveals exactly how I stand, debit so much, credit so much.

I marvel at it all. I watch him, fascinated. He has resolved my problem to the simplest formula so that even I can understand it. How did he do it? How did he—within two hours—put straight affairs that has taken me six months to confuse totally. A sense of utter dependence and trust comes over me. . . .

My affairs are not in such a bad way as I feared. I have even a slight credit balance. . . .

At the end of it all he says, 'I am sorry to have kept you all this time; it must have been boring for you to watch and do nothing, but really this is a one man's job.'

August 17th. I was afraid that this final reckoning of accounts may mean that it is all over . . . at the end of the evening, after a day spent in a long ride in the country, bathing and lazing in the sunshine, I almost expect him to say 'good-bye'. My heart beats . . . I am frightened, so frightened that I do not even dare

to ask him when will he come to see me again. . . . I see him to the car. He has his bag packed. He bends down and kisses me, and I try to put my heart, my trust and devotion into my kiss. . . . He gets in the car, the door slams. He starts the engine. . . . 'Good-bye, Frieda . . . till next Wednesday at twelvish.' He has taken it for granted that I will stay.

August 19th. I see everything in terms of my new life. Every man I see I compare with him. I have a new set of interests. I read everything I can about the British Luftwaffe, I study the life of the men, I make investigations about how they are cared for, whether they have enough good food, quarters. I wish I could pluck up the courage to make proper measurements of his size so that the socks I am knitting will be suitable. I had finished a sweater for him, but I could not pluck up enough courage to give it to him . . . perhaps he would not like it that I should give him the personal presents of a sweetheart or sister. . . .

I feel so proud of him when I read a newspaper or overhear a conversation about the glorious Royal Air Force. I see my happiness in the way people look at me, the way they instinctively smile, the attentions people pay me . . . I have changed so much. . . . I look at myself in the glass a dozen times a day, and I almost watch the progress of my resurrection!

Life is very sweet. I dare not think of what might happen *in the end*. Sometimes I am filled with a dark brooding late at night . . . I know then I have lost my courage . . . I feel utterly weak and dependent on him. . . .

But during the day I forget. I feel a revival of strength. I have energy to do anything. I make plans for him. I feel I can master any difficulty. I thrill with satisfaction at my charms, I feel supremely confident in myself. I desire to devote myself entirely to please him, and I think my power to do so is strong. . . .

August 21st. It is becoming unbearably sweet . . . the difficulties that our relationship present require all my resources.

When he came to-day I expected to find difficulties . . . but I never imagined the strength of his feelings for me could be so powerful, so urgent. It taxed all my skill, all my understanding of men. When we went for a bathe at the swimming-pool he held me under the water in a grip of iron until I thought he would drown, he forgot himself so utterly.

All day long we played, danced, rushed about the country-side in the car . . . anything to distract him. . . . The day sped by on wings.

We talk less . . . we understand each other more. . . . He had such a strained look sometimes, and I touch his hand and after a while he seems to be at peace for a little time. I never ask him about his active service . . . he has come to me for peace and to forget.

I dare not think about the life he leads. I almost seek to entrance myself with my childish feeling that such as he cannot possibly know death. . . . What has death to do with him? No, no!

August 22nd. Something happened to-day that filled me with fear and with delight. I *know* now that I have changed.

Paula phoned me again. She asked me how I am and I told her vaguely that I am very well and very happy here, that I have found a real friend. She tells me that she is having trouble with money and asks me straight out to lend her twenty pounds. Of course, I have not any money. The little I have he has given me. I feel revolted at the thought that this money should be given to Paula. Paula is angry with me. She thinks I am doing well for myself. When I tell her that I am staying here and living with him for a pound a week pocket money she almost collapses. She refuses to believe me. It takes me half an hour to explain, and then she still asks me idiotic questions that show she does not really understand.

Suddenly Paula asks me if I can give her the phone numbers of my former regular clients. I do so with considerable relief, and she is so astonished that I laugh for five minutes. . . . I am helpless with laughter, it is like a paroxysm. She can have them all—all my regular clients! She cannot understand me. I feel only a great relief and pity for her. Poor Paula.

Then once more she asks me for money. Ten pounds. I say, no. Five then. Surely I can spare five! No, no! Not a shilling! It is *his* money. Had I still some of my money left I would give it all to her. But she cannot understand. She is in a rage. We quarrel. I lose my head. Suddenly I feel I detest her, despise this creature!

Very well, she says, after all I have done for you. Done for me? Dragged me into that darkness and horror? Done for me?

No, no, we have nothing in common any longer. She does not understand me at all now and I can see her with new eyes.

August 23rd. So that's that. . . . On with the new life! On! On! A plunge into oblivion—forgetfulness! I depend on him, how I depend on him now! For my life, my love. . . . Every

piece of bread that I put in my mouth and the new joy I have in seeing a plant slowly turn towards the sun . . . that is his! The pillow on which I lay my head and the suffocating sweetness that comes over me when I see the wind playing on the water . . . that is his! The clothes that keep me warm and hide my nakedness and the tremor that runs through me at a kind look, a smile, an act of courtesy . . . that is his!

We walk side by side, our hands joined, and a thousand men salute him . . . and look at me with pleasure and respect.

To-night this happened: We had gone dancing, and I wait for him in the lounge whilst he has gone to the cloak-room for his cap. I ask a policeman who is standing at the doorway some foolish question out of sheer companionable feeling. He touches his hat and then says solemnly, 'Excuse me, young lady, but are you an alien?' I tell him I am. He looks portentous, then says gravely, 'Don't you know, miss, that the new regulations do not permit you to be about at this time? It is after one a.m.' I am confused. I have forgotten all about these tiresome regulations. The policeman says thoughtfully, 'I'm sorry, miss, but it looks as though I'll have to ask you to come with me.' I blush. The situation is absurd, but I have obviously no excuse for ignoring the regulations. I am tongue-tied.

Then Boy appears. He takes me by the arm. The policeman salutes. 'What is it, Frieda?' asks Boy. The policeman tells him. Then adds: 'I am sure it is a great nuisance, but the young lady is not allowed to be out after twelve. I don't want to embarrass her, but I will be failing in my duty unless I take her in my care.'

'Will it be all right if she is in my care?' says Boy.

The policeman laughs and salutes smartly. 'Yes, sir, if you promise to keep a good eye on her.'

'There will be no difficulty about that.'

'Yes, sir. Good night, sir.'

August 27th. It is such a great pity that some things are never mentioned between us. To-day, for instance, I have discovered something of such profound importance to us both. I long to tell him, as although he is so sweet and seems to have infinite trust in me, there must be moments when he wonders and tries to reconcile what I appear to be and what I was at one time. What I was at one time. . . . I have made such a precious discovery that I feel I will burst unless I tell someone. I want to shout it from the house-tops. . . . But that cannot be, so I cherish

this great secret of mine and I offer thanksgiving for this new release, this precious draught that refreshes me.

He had persuaded me to take out an insurance policy; he wants me to save. It is to be a very small savings scheme, but it is to steady my impulsiveness about monetary things. I listen and obey him. I write to a company he has told me about, and they answer me with a prospectus about their scheme and colossal assets. My policy is to be for a thousand pounds, and I am to save ten shillings weekly for thirty-five years! When I tell him he nods solemnly; he approves fully. His seriousness is delicious! The Nazis are at the gate, having overrun the whole of Europe in six weeks—every day he is in a life and death struggle in the sky—the papers are full of imminent invasion—and he approves of my putting away ten shillings weekly for thirty-five years. Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven. (I am serious.)

I write thanking the company, and tell them what I am prepared to do. They answer asking me to call when convenient for the usual medical examination.

I have nothing to do to-day so I call at the offices, and in a few minutes I am shown into the doctor's offices.

The medical examination is to be thorough. The doctor is courteous, quiet and formal. 'Will you kindly go into that cubicle, Miss Carel? You will find some things on which you can hang up your clothes.' I am about to obey when I notice—without looking at him—that his eyes travel down my figure. I give him a quick glance and catch that look, that stripping look that I knew so well.

The feelings that rise in me astonish me! I am as indignant as a young virgin!

Naturally I have control of myself and do not show it. Instead I smile and say, 'Please excuse me, but my religion does not permit me to be medically examined except by a female doctor.'(!)

September 3rd. Please, God, let him go on caring for me. I don't want anything else, I don't want any other friends, I don't want money or a fine home or silk things; just a piece of bread and his care. I don't know what I shall do now without him. I am well again now, you know that, God. Let him go on caring for me, let me shelter in his strength, let me keep my mite of self-respect, let me have just a little security, let me stay in the light still, God. I shall give him all my love, all my devotion. I shall live only for him. I don't want to share his glory, I don't

want him to take me as his wife, I don't want him to share his friends, his honourable world with me. But I shall be his wife and his nurse and his mother, I shall give him everything he asks of me, God. You have been so generous, God. Please, please let him go on caring for me. You know I am well again, you know how I have suffered and what I will have to suffer if he does not go on caring for me. Please, God, please don't let me die again, don't let me, don't let me!

Please, God, let me go on believing in you.

12

Boy stopped reading. Slowly he put down the book and, in doing so, felt for the first time the stiffness of his fingers so intent had been his grasp. For a moment or two he could not breathe freely. He looked around him at the familiar and yet strangely new scene, the little bedroom, his picture on the little dressing-table. Once more he breathed in the scent that clung to the clothes in the wardrobe. He was deeply moved and, in a manner, calmed. The logic of the events had a deeply remorseless note that strangely agitated him. He was pleased and he was a little afraid. How deeply he was involved now! What a remarkable, profound, disturbing creature was this girl; he was overpowered with the deep melancholy strain in the writing. And she was his Pygmalion! He was affected by a strong secret pleasure as that of a creator and, at the same time, taken aback as might a painter whose picture had suddenly stepped out of its frame and spoken to him.

He wanted to be alone a little while to think . . . so many sweet yet disturbing feelings had been invoked. He put the book back hastily into the coat, shut the wardrobe door and quickly returned to the parlour, where he once more resumed his seat and mechanically began to light a cigarette.

On the whole . . . he had to admit it . . . he was glad he had read the diary. First of all there was no questioning the sincerity of what she wrote. What had struck him was the change in the handwriting, particularly towards the end; how the angular stark characters that seemed to be a series of exclamation points gradually assumed a frail smoothness and then a richly-flowing, characterful strength.

At first he dwelt on certain points in the diary at random. He had been struck by the deep humility and passion. Throughout

this humility such a pride shone! How unobtrusive had been her devotion, how complete! He was touched by the pathos and burning revolt of her early days in that life, a revolt that flared up fitfully and then began to flicker pitifully . . . as her resistance waned. Knowing as he did how this life had been a remorseless extension of the outrage committed on her by that Gestapo official he could attach no blame to her, could only feel horror at the inexorability of circumstances. How his heart went out to her every time he thought of it!

There were many things new to him, things revealed to him of which previously he had had only intimations. Her frigidity—that armour, as she had called it—which had made a tedious mockery of the night in London . . . he had often wondered whether, in spite of the pressure of events that had forced her to take to that life, there might yet have been a strain of viciousness in her. Thank heaven, he understood now. She had had to grow a mental and physical defence equipment to withstand the recurring shock of the act that she abhorred to the very depths of her being. And had he not proof of the normal quality of her impulses by the rapidity of her recovery at the first opportunity she had, thanks to himself? As he thought of it his eyes filled with tears. He was doubly, triply confirmed in his early faith in her! No, no, life was to blame, fate—politics—call it what you will—she had been a victim, a tragic—yes, even a heroic—victim! That only.

This thought greatly heartened Boy. He was proud and happy that his early instincts had proved right; a joy of faith filled him—he had been right, gloriously, nobly he had been justified in all his ardent idealism—he could even permit himself a passing tribute! Such cynicism as Murray's he need fear no longer, need only to ignore it with the contempt that makes comment unnecessary.

At the same time a peculiar thought struck him as he remembered a reference to Murray in her diary. He remembered the encounter with that policewoman. What a nerve to call her his sister! That certainly required pluck, meeting a strange girl of that sort and there and then, in the street, with a whole crowd collecting possibly, calling her his sister! Boy was impressed in spite of himself. . . .

Many lines rang in his mind. That terrible cry, 'Can't they wait until I'm dead!' made him shudder and feel cold. He had never suspected there could be such suffering. . . .

Understanding, therefore, spelt compassion. He felt his heart

beat faster with pride in having this chance to help her, to restore her spirit, her self-respect, comfort her, nurse her back to mental health, happiness. How little she wanted from him! Not a place in his world, not position or wealth, not even the small things that a normal civilized person expects as his right. Only that he should go on caring for her. . . . Could he deny that even to a stray dog broken under the wheels of a car? Boy felt such tenderness that the blood in his veins seemed to run sweetly and he wanted to throw himself on his knees and thank his Maker for giving him this errand of mercy, which filled him with a happiness he had not thought possible.

He had hardly time to dry the tears that had sprung to his eyes when he heard her step and the sound of the latch-key. As she came in he could not restrain giving her such a look that she blushed and lowered her eyes. He came up to her and, taking her by the shoulders, whispered, "It just occurred to me that I love you very much, darling. I thought you might be interested to know." There was such feeling in these lightly-uttered words that her thin hands tightened on his arm.

The sun held the air entranced in a shimmering haze like gold dust on the green fields. Boy lay at full length on the grass, his head pillowed in her lap. They had been eating sandwiches from their picnic basket, which had got stuck to the white paper, but as they were both hungry these trifles did not matter. For some time they said nothing. The whole of the afternoon he had watched her run in the fields, bathe in the lake, comb out her hair so that it shed blue-gold drops of water like a bush shaken by the wind after recent rain; he had seen the grass bend back alive under her feet. The fruit trees were so ripe that they dropped their pears at a touch. Sometime during that afternoon they had waylaid a girl carrying a pail of fresh milk which foamed warmly, and Frieda had offered to hold it whilst he drank. She had lifted the pail and, as he bent down, he saw the iron rim pressing against her breast, marking it with its impress. Their eyes met and he lowered his and began to drink deeply of the milk which was sweet and warm with the sun steeped in it; he felt for a moment that he was drinking the loving-kindness which she held up and offered to him. As he withdrew his head after satisfying his thirst he saw that the iron rim had bitten deeply into her breast, and, as soon as the milk-girl had gone, he fell on his knees and clasped her about the hips, pressing a kiss on the faint red scar.

For a moment his feelings overcame him. He trembled, his brain clouded whilst a passion deep and roaring like an organ-note filled him.

She had bent down and whispered softly, "Shall we go over there?"

He looked up and understood. A little beyond the park-land was a hay-field; stacks were piled high and the fresh-cut field shone in the sun like beaten gold. The work was finished and the place was deserted, left to the maturing labour of the sun. They walked side by side and his pulse beat with the new swift tide of blood that coursed and broke over his senses. Together they climbed one of the stacks and for a time lay side by side, almost buried in the warm, metal-smooth, yielding hay; it broke brittly beneath them and had a sharp scent that rose hotly to their lungs. For a few minutes he held her tightly in his arms, feeling the heat of her body seep into his own through their thin shirts. It was difficult to speak, to say anything, but he felt he must ask her.

"Do you really want to?"

For answer she kissed him with warm, trembling lips, and her smoky-blue eyes were filled with a light he had never seen before. He caressed her gently. She wore a thin gold chain round her throat, and as he plucked it apart the ends sprang away like a tiny snake and a mother-of-pearl button from her blouse broke and slipped through his nerveless fingers. He could hardly breathe with excitement.

She seemed very lovely to him. Her movements were slow and her skin had absorbed the sun until it shone like pale leather. All this green and gold about her, the heavily-burdened trees that yielded sun-baked fruit at a touch, the whole generous flow of creation on this wonderful autumn afternoon, was in his blood and bones. She lay in his arms still and shimmering at a touch as some deep tranquil pool that he would divide in one plunge.

Although her skin was brown the down on her cheeks was so fair, that, with its faint sheen of perspiration, it glowed like silver. He bent down to kiss her soft red mouth and felt it yield, mould with his lips; he felt the pressure of her teeth, the quiver of awakening muscles, the human scent. He felt her weaken, yield and yield until his hands grew strong as pincers on her flesh, which became like wax. With gentleness and deep wisdom of touch she guided his passion, which flowered and flowered to a seemingly endless climax. Every nerve quivered,

every muscle awoke, his fingers, lips, tongue were tipped with flame. The final efflorescence, the ecstatic release, the swooning death, left him hushed with contentment, and they lay encircled within their bodies, his happiness feeding on hers, his flesh within her flesh, entranced in a peace that seemed tangible, made them feel inviolable.

How long they lay, how long they slept, how long they loved had no place in time. Again and again they rediscovered one another in the ebb and flow of passion. The sharp exciting scent of her perspiration, her breath in his lungs, the upward pull of the curving breast and the nipples that pointed in his hands, the smile asleep in her lips, the unseeing illumined eyes, something hot, molten between her thighs, a kiss that was like a flower pressed into the brain, tenderness, storm and gracious death; and then again, a tiny mole, a whole universe of chiming stars, a tremor of her knees, the hollow haven within her profoundly-arched hips, bounty and breathlessness and annihilation . . . tranquillity commingling with sleep like falling into a deep well.

At length he awoke, muttered incoherently something invoked by his childhood days, rubbed his eyes, kissed her hair and said, like a small boy, "I'm hungry."

"What, sweetheart? It's much later now. . . . Look, the sun isn't up there any more . . . it's over there. . . ."

He did not hear her. "I'm hungry," he said weakly, and uttered a sighing yawn.

". . . over there. . . . Or was I imagining? . . . Where was the sun?"

". . . something to eat, darling. I'm simply starved. . . ."

But instead of getting up he immediately fell asleep again.

He stared up at the patterns made by the foliage, wedges and spirals of blue as a background to dark green and red-gold, patterns that shivered and sighed. His head in her lap was smoothed and caressed until he felt half hypnotized.

"Don't fall asleep again, darling. Soon it will be quite cold."

"What?"

"Darling, there's egg on your mouth. Wipe it off. No, a little lower."

"What's that funny noise?"

"Do you mean me?"

"No, silly. It came from the tree."

"I don't know. A bird, I expect. Don't fall asleep, darling. You might catch cold. It's cooler now."

"Can't be a bird. Probably some insect."

"Insects don't make noise, unless they're bees or things. Are bees insects?"

"I suppose they are. But then they fly. That ought to make them birds."

"Everything that flies isn't a bird. Men fly."

"What?"

"I said, men fly."

"I know, but why?"

"Because they've got aeroplanes."

"I mean, what made you say men fly?"

"I've forgotten. Something about a noise you heard in the tree."

"What noise?"

"I don't know."

"What a silly conversation."

"What?"

"I said, I love you."

"Do you?"

"Yes. . . ."

"Why did you say that?"

"Because I wanted you to hear it. You weren't listening to me."

"I love you, too."

"Isn't that a coincidence?"

"Yes."

"It's very nearly a miracle."

"How can anything be very nearly a miracle? It's either a miracle or isn't. It's like in arithmetic. If you say twice two make four and a half, it's wrong, not nearly right."

"In that case, it is a miracle."

"Now, isn't that just like a woman?"

"What is?"

"Your argument. You want something to be something so immediately it is, logic or no, reality or no."

"Don't you believe in miracles?"

"No."

"What do you believe in, then?"

"The greatest good of the greatest number. Or, from each according to his means, unto each according to his needs."

She repeated the words to herself.

"Did you think that out yourself?"

"No, of course not."

"They're very lovely words. It's the first time I ever heard them. From each, unto each. That's like making love."

"Yes."

• "Darling."

"Yes?"

"Have you ever thought why they say '*make* love'? Something that you make, not something that just happens. It is true, isn't it, darling? We *make* love; it is something we contrive and fashion with our hands, with our words, with our actions. It is built up of thousands of little things, and it starts long before our hands even touch. Our love was gradually built up, and it began with things you did many days before our first kiss even. Being kind, playing tennis, putting your coat round me when it was cold, telling me something nice that you saw."

"Yes."

"Darling."

"Yes?"

"What would be the nicest thing you would like to do now, if you could?"

"I'd pack a collapsible tent, some inflatable cushions, a case of wine, a case of books and take you for a long, long flight in our latest bomber to an island in the South Seas. Imagine the surprise of the intelligence officer and the wing commander when, instead of dutifully dropping a load on Berlin, I turn the machine south and south and south. . . . I often feel like doing something like that. When you've control of an aircraft you feel you have all the power and freedom in the world. What restrains one from using it and sends one back and forth from base to target and back to base like a tram-driver?"

"Why don't you do it?"

"Darling, we'd lose the war then."

"Modest!"

"Well, then, what if everybody were to do it?"

"Then there'd be no war at all."

"Ah! The woman speaks again. Wishful thinking."

"Well, it's the only logic, really. When I know something is so, I know there must be an argument to explain it. Not like you men who take a pencil and paper and prove that the Germans are five-legged men with dragon's teeth from 1914-18 and then two-legged with dentures from 1918-39, when they revert to their original form, as from September 3rd."

"Just a moment, darling. What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the war."

"The war. . . . What war?"

"Oh, the war between the sexes, the war between the ants . . . any war."

"Now I come to think of it, I wonder what I would do if war broke out just where we are sitting."

"You mean the war between the ants?"

"Yes . . . for the territory between two blades of grass."

"Well, what would you do?"

"I'd pick up the black ants' fuehrer . . . hold him in the palm of my hand . . . and say in my imperious voice, 'Your battlefield must be shifted at once. This ground is occupied for the important business of making love.'"

"Darling," he said.

"Yes?"

"Why was it so good?"

She said nothing for a moment, then, "Because of patience."

"Patience. . . . Because of that?"

"Well, patience and sweetness and—from each, unto each. . . . But above all, patience."

"Darling."

"Yes?"

"I had no idea, I never dreamed it could be so good. And you kept *giving* and *giving*. . . ."

"That," she said, "was because of love."

IT usually happened so quickly that Boy had no time to think of anything but the controls, the guns, the sights, the speed of flight. When it happened this time he knew at once that his adversary was inexperienced. Boy's head-on attack made the other flinch long before there was danger. After that it was easy. The other wrestled with him as a man wrestles in a whirlpool; the inexorable tide would sweep him mercilessly to that crucial point where he would be doomed—flush in the gun-sights. The quivering dynamism of the machine-guns—and the enemy machine was slashed along the fuselage and then down the entire length of the body as Boy swept his aircraft with that finely-

timed stroke of a rapier thrust, not wasting a shell. His guns closed their iron mouths in a grim silence as the Me went down, out of control.

"Neil," he said through the radio-telephone, "I'm running right out of juice. How about you?"

"The same. We might try landing here. The country's fairly flat. It's a bit risky trying to get back to the base across London."

"We might have to make a three-point landing on Hammer-smith Broadway," he said, grinning. "Well, I'm going to find a nice soft spot right here."

They circled and Boy landed his aircraft gently in the field. As he switched off the engine a sudden silence, the green field, the smell of hay immediately relaxed him. With his head still full of the noise of the aircraft and the guns, his mouth still bitter with the taste of smoke, he saw in his mind's eye something that had haunted him in these bitter moments, a stretch of green and Frieda's footprints in the grass which rose back alive under-foot. He jumped out of his machine light-heartedly, glad to be alive.

He vaulted the stile and ran quickly along to the next field and the next until he found it.

"Gosh, the moths have certainly got it," he muttered. "I wonder if he's still alive in there, poor bastard."

The Me was crumpled up, smoking, the left wing and half the airscrew twisted out of shape. A tongue of flame like a snake's fang flickered out suddenly along the fuselage. A loose wheel still ticked on in its ball-bearing grooves.

Boy skirted the aircraft until he suddenly saw the Nazi pilot. He was half out of his machine as it lay on its side. Its weight rested across his spine. He was repeating the same thing over and over again in a gasping intake of breath, his face and hair were drenched with sweat.

"Oh, hell, I don't understand your damned language," muttered Boy fiercely. Gently he got his arms round the pilot and tried to draw him from under the mangled weight of metal that was pressing him to the earth. The Nazi began to cry and shake his head.

"What are you trying to say? Nicht sprach deutsche."

It happened suddenly.

Boy started as though stung. He found he was trembling, unable to move, rooted to the spot. His eyes gazed into the Nazi's, reflecting his horror.

The explosion had been followed by a vile roar and a positive

inferno of bright green and yellow flame leaped along the length of the aircraft. Boy's hand scrabbled in the ground and his heart nearly burst with his gigantic effort to budge the metal claws that enslaved the Nazi.

"Oh, don't keep on saying that again and again. I don't understand, I tell you. Don't you see, you poor bugger."

His finger-nails were covered with blood and sweat and earth as he tore frantically.

"What in hell are you trying to do?" said Murray. He sounded out of breath.

"Help me, Neil. For Christ's sake, lend a hand."

"You can't——"

"I must. We've got to. Help me, *help me, blast your eyes!*"

"You fool, you can't shift two tons of metal. Get out of the way."

Boy suddenly felt his strength go. He stood aside as Murray walked quickly to the Nazi. They talked quietly a moment or two, then there was the scrape of a match. Boy turned his back to the brightly blazing aircraft, his hands clenched to prevent his fingers trembling. He steeled himself.

The revolver spoke twice bitterly.

"Come on, buck up," said Murray savagely. "Get away from there. The whole bag of tricks will go up in a moment. What in heaven's name did you think you were doing? Trying to be kind?"

He watched Boy's eyes as he spoke.

"Here," he said roughly, "light up and fall into step. Quick march."

"Damn you. Why must you always work things out like that? What if I couldn't get him out? I tried, didn't I? I tried. I couldn't get him out, but I tried. Why must you always work things out? Sometimes one can——"

"Never mind, don't take it like that, Hayward. Come and have a drink."

"No, damn you. I couldn't help it if I couldn't get him out. I had to do something. I had to. I couldn't stand by. I couldn't——"

"I know. Shut up, will you? Come and have a drink."

"I couldn't just stand by, don't you see. I couldn't just let him—I couldn't——"

"But it was no good. You're not a fool. You know nothing else could be done. You had your revolver. Why did you wait until he was——"

"Oh, go to hell."

They walked on in silence through the green fields.

"I was only trying to be——" began Boy bitterly.

"Kind?" said Murray.

He woke up and blinked at the strong sunlight, then stretched and rubbed his eyes. Yawning luxuriously, he turned at the commotion that was going on in the garden. He sat up and, from where the bed stood by the window, he could see everything. He watched with sleepy amusement the scene that was enacted in the chicken run. Frieda, as usual, was in trouble. She could never manage the smallest member of the modest family of livestock she had insisted on planting in their little back garden. She was afraid of the cockerel who usually treated her with superb contempt, the goose and she had a mutual animosity of long standing, the hens ignored her and seemed to sense her inability to cope with them, the smallest chick seemed to sauce her. Feeding time was a task fraught with awful responsibility. As soon as she opened a pen the chicks ran headlong between her legs and, in order to retrieve them, she turned and commenced a desperate chase, leaving the door open for the whole brood to walk out at leisure. She had a name for every one of the family, and she referred to them with a brooding bitterness usually reserved for opposing enemy forces. And yet she would spend a sleepless night when the time came to convert them to food. She complained that after the pain of bringing them up, although they were all foes, she could not bear the thought of committing them to the slaughter yard.

At this moment she was having a showdown with the cockerel. This arrogant bird was occupied with tearing the feathers of the back of a mortified hen, not in any spirit of malevolence, but out of sheer high spirits and with the healthy lust of a sporting male seeking a little exercise. Naturally Frieda took this innocent diversion as a slight on the entire female sex. She approached the bird with fear but staunch determination, and began to shoo vigorously. The cockerel paused in his gay endeavours to sharpen his claws on the neck of his lady, and reared his magnificent head to its illimitable height; then, with a wicked gleam in his eye, he abandoned the garrulously complaining hen—who was probably sorry that he had—and flew straight at Frieda. She screamed and turned away, quite incapable of any coherent action she was in such an ecstasy of fear. Boy, who had been

awaiting this development, now hurled the shoe with accuracy and force, catching the cockerel a crack on his pate that staggered him. Frieda, finding her problem now solved and the cockerel stunned, gave him a contemptuous kick. "Take that, you bugger!" she said. "Let that teach you a lesson!" And she sailed off serenely, her head high, a conqueror!

"Frieda!"

She came running in at the sound of her lord and master's voice. When she entered the bedroom Boy had settled himself comfortably amongst his blankets, which he had drawn up to his chin. Only a tousled head showed.

"Frieda!"

"Yes, dear." She stood by the bed like an obedient maid.

"You must not use that word."

"Is it a very bad word, darling? I heard a lady use it."

"No lady ever uses that word."

"She was a Lady Somebody."

"They usually are. Don't use it again. It means . . . Well, nobody quite knows what it does mean, but all agree that its meaning is very rude."

"I see, dear. I won't use it again."

"You don't see at all."

"No, dear."

She kissed the only part of him that was showing on the pillow.

He sighed. "Frieda!"

"Yes, darling?"

"What's the time?"

"Ten past seven."

"Darling, this is a positively indecent hour to get up. Only the suffering proletariat and the debauched gentry are about at this time. An officer and a gentleman never rises before nine when off duty."

"I'm sorry. Dr. Goebbels woke me."

"Who, darling, is Dr. Goebbels?"

"The—one I called by the word I mustn't use."

Boy yawned, but inquired with interest, "Did he earn this name by virtue of his far-reaching voice?"

"No, by his excessive virility."

Boy yawned and laughed. "You know, darling, I have a sneaking sympathy for Dr. Goebbels—our Dr. Goebbels, I mean. Why did you—awww—pardon!—why did you drive him away from his lady friend? She was probably enjoying it—aww—pardon!—as much as he was."

"You men make me sick," she said, and sat down on the bed, affectionately slapping the hump of his posterior.

He poked his head out a moment. "Darling, what is that thing you're wearing?"

"Do you mean this frock?"

"Yes."

"It's the one you gave me last month. Don't you like it any more?"

"I don't fancy you in it this morning."

"What do you fancy me in?"

"Let me see . . . something in blue, with lots of fluffy titbits, bows and things."

"You're absurd."

Nevertheless she went to the wardrobe and, opening it, examined an array of clothes, finally selecting one blue dress, which she unhooked and laid out. Then she proceeded to slip off the neat grey frock she had on. Boy watched this devoted activity, chuckling.

"There!" she said, straightening the new frock over her knees, "Do you like me now?"

He puckered up his lips, looked at her with sleepy boredom, then fell back on the bed listlessly. He stared tranquilly up at the ceiling.

"Not enough bows," he pronounced at length.

"Not enough bows?"

"Don't stand there repeating like a parrot."

"But, darling, bows belong to the 1920 fashion. Your mother used to wear them."

He cocked an eye. "And you think what's good enough for my mother isn't good enough for you?"

"I didn't say that."

"Enough. Try something in red."

"Oh, you pig! I'd like to slosh you with a wet fish! You wouldn't like laurel leaves and a bunch of grapes hanging above your head from the ceiling?"

But nevertheless she examined the wardrobe afresh. Once more she slipped off her dress and pulled a wine-red dress over her head, wriggling into its tight folds.

"Well, what do you say now?"

"Very nice."

"That is sweet of you! You've made me happy for the day!"

"But don't you think those stockings are the wrong shade?"

"What's the matter with this shade?"

"Too dark for red. Try something lighter."

She pulled open a drawer viciously and jerked out a pair of light silk stockings. Then she sat down heavily on his feet and, pulling up her dress, began to peel off her stockings. She was swearing at him heartily in French, which always gave him a kick. As she bent down to draw on the new stockings she caught his eye. Immediately she realized the game he was playing. She jerked down her dress and jumped up in a rage.

"Why, you beast! So that's it! Cochon! Pig-dog! Oh! I could kill you!"

Seizing a cushion she began to belabour him heartily.

"You are no gentleman! What a man I have chosen! Oh! Oh! Take that—and that—and that! You bee! Bee!"

He was helpless with laughter.

"Hold—hold on—— Oh, Lord, darling, stop—— Pax! I surrender! Armistice! Mercy! Oh, Lord!"

Their struggle finished up in a long kiss.

"Have you been drinking milk?"

"No," she said. "Why?"

"You smell of milk, just like children."

"You're imagining."

"Darling, feel in my jacket pocket. There's a large brown envelope. It's for you. I forgot to give it to you last night."

"Oh, how lovely! A present! What's inside?"

"Open it and see."

She did so, and discovered a delicate black silk gauze night-gown trimmed with black lace. It was threaded with gold and was so fragile it could be contained in the palm of her hand. She was delighted with this effeminate trifle, so difficult to get since the collapse of France. She looked at him with affectionate irony.

"Did you say this present was for me or for yourself?"

He laughed "Try it on, will you?"

"What, now?"

"Please!"

"You're an awful tyrant, a positive monster!"

"Now that I've got it for you the least you can do is to let me see you in it."

"Oh, all right."

It was even better than he had imagined it would be.

"Isn't it a picture, darling! When the saleswoman showed it to me she took ten minutes to persuade me that it could cover a grown-up woman. Why, I could lose it in my fist."

"It's very nice, sweetheart. I really love it."

"Frieda!"

"Yes?"

"Hop into bed."

"Darling, no! After last night!"

"Come on, darling, get in."

"No!"

"But you'll catch cold!"

"Oh, yea?" she said derisively.

But she had got too close for him. He caught her wrist in an iron grip and tumbled her in before she knew what was happening.

"Darling, no! No! Positively, no!"

"Shut up, will you? Haven't touched you yet!"

"Don't! Let me go! Please! *Please! Armistice!*"

"Cluck, cluck, cluck!" he cried derisively.

"Don't! Stop! Oh, don't! Stop!" she cried. Then she said softly, "Oh, oh, oh . . . oh! Don't stop. . . ."

At length he embraced her gently and patted her shoulders and fondled her. "There, there, darling. . . . There, there. . . ."

Half an hour or so later he gently slipped out of bed.

"Where are you going?" she murmured, her eyes closed.

"To get you some tea, honey. No, you mustn't get up. I'll make breakfast this morning. What would you like, tea or coffee?"

"I wish coffee, please."

"Want," he corrected.

"Is my English getting better?" she murmured.

"With every word you utter."

"I only make mistakes when I'm tired," she whispered. He kissed her warm mouth, which became tremulous under the touch of his lips.

Ten minutes later he brought up a tray with some bacon and eggs, bread and butter and honey, and steaming coffee, her *New Statesman and Nation* and his *New Yorker*. He propped up pillows for her and she drank her coffee. She picked up her paper and began to read it, a page here and there, dwelling on items at random and shaking her head, sighing or otherwise demonstrating her reactions at what she read. He read his *New Yorker* with solemn attention, treating each joke with the seriousness it deserved. He was now well accustomed to her manner of reading and no longer paid any attention to her commentary, but when at last she put the paper down and said, "Oh, darling,

I do love Socialism! It's so well-meaning!" he gave up his *New Yorker* and burst into laughter.

"Why do you laugh? Have I said something silly?"

"No, darling, but I can hear the angels calling, 'Dear old Joe.'"

"I don't understand."

"Socialism," he said, "is a serious system of political economy. It is one of the greatest questions of the day. It threatens civil war in every country in the world. Many of its leaders are men of great sincerity who have made themselves martyrs to their cause. Although I keep an open mind about it there are many principles of Socialism whose authority seems to me indisputable. For instance, take their theory of surplus value."

With great care and impartiality he outlined this theory to the best of his ability. Always at home with anything that concerned figures and an able diagnostician, he thoroughly enjoyed himself.

When he finished she patted his hand and said, "I wish I was clever enough to argue with you about it. You must find it so dull."

"I'd hate any argument," he confessed cheerfully. In fact, most of the charm in these conversations with her was her acceptance of his word as law, which to him showed her completely intelligent attitude.

He returned to his *New Yorker*, well satisfied with himself.

They had now known each other some ten weeks and had grown to understand one another so well that they instinctively knew how to please, what to avoid, and broadly, what to expect. He had come to confess it—he was in love with her. He often wondered how long he had felt towards her this way; if he had grown to love her from the start it rather upset his pleasing and flattering theory that he had paid her attentions and offered his help from disinterested motives of humanity.

When he first discovered he loved her he was surprised at his reluctance to admit it to himself, but as he became certain of his feelings he also understood what qualities in her had created it. Apart from her strong physical attractions which had drawn him from the beginning, he found in her some complementary mental and character traits that seemed to make her company, her comradeship necessary to him. Qualities of deep-ingrained romanticism, impracticability, physical nervousness appealed to his sense of protective strength and heightened his feeling of power. Often when he had enjoyed displaying his quick practical mind in settling her budget, in frightening away a dog—or, as

that morning, the cockerel—he felt a real satisfaction and was touched by her feminine dependence. Her indolent yet colourful personality appealed to him as something exotic, he liked her soft hesitating speech, her rapid fiery French when she was angry or passionate, her extreme yet pleasing tastes in clothes, in furnishing their home, in books, in pictures. Yet in spite of his tougher-fibred mind, his logic and realism, he knew that she had a natural wisdom and understanding that, since he had known the struggle in the front line, appealed to him with its seriousness and warmth. Once, he remembered, when they had been for a walk in the country, they were disgusted with the treatment by a gipsy of his broken-down nag. The man, trying to urge the beast quickly uphill, had repeatedly struck it across the eyes with a whip. The tormented animal simply stood in its tracks, trembling with terror and pain. Boy had an impulse to drag the man down off his perch and teach him a severe lesson. Frieda sensed his desire and, restraining him, walked up to the gipsy and burst into derisive laughter at his predicament. She jeered at him and, turning to the horse, made some contemptuous comments about its senile weakness. The gipsy, highly incensed and touched on a matter of personal pride in his possessions, jumped down and began to stroke the nose of his horse protectively. He looked at Frieda in a rage and—to demonstrate his steed's qualities—coaxed and encouraged it uphill with sugar.

Later she told him that had Boy given the man the thrashing he deserved he would later only vent his spleen all the more on the horse. Boy was struck by this display of intuitive understanding of human weakness, jealousy and pride; he was incapable of these judgments.

Another time, when they were in town, they were travelling by bus in the black-out and a drunk, who had been particularly annoying in his demonstrations, tried to dismount whilst they were moving at the dangerous wheeling route that marked Hyde Park Corner. Frieda had whispered to him in agitation, "Darling, please help him—he'll fall off!" Boy, whose sense of propriety was outraged by the objectionable behaviour of the drunk, snapped back, "Let him. It will teach him a lesson." She said, quietly and urgently, "Do help, darling. To be drunk is only a little thing. He doesn't deserve to get killed for that." Boy acted promptly.

These two occasions were unforgettable to him and they impressed him forcefully with her good sense and warmth of feeling. The adolescent girl who had tilted at the Nazi windmills

had travelled a long road since those days, yet the same traits of generous moral courage and sense of justice were still there.

After breakfast had been cleared away they went for a long drive in Bill Farson's car, which Boy had managed to borrow for the occasion. They had originally planned to see a certain film in town, but by the time they were well out in the country they found so much to occupy their attention that they forgot all about it. They lunched on the way to town. They had spoken little throughout the day, and were aware of such a sense of peace and harmony in each other and their surroundings that, when Boy remembered about the film, and mentioned the matter, she looked a little puzzled a moment, then shrugged her shoulders.

He stopped the car. For a moment he said nothing, just listened.

"Listen, darling," he said.

"Yes, it is nice. . . ." She understood what he meant. There was nothing to hear—only the silence.

"Shall we go to town?"

"Do you want to?"

"Do you?"

"This," he said, "gets us nowhere."

"That," she said, "is rather a good place."

And so the day passed by. At the end of it Boy could not remember anything they had done, nothing of moment or interest had occurred, nothing of any distinction had been achieved, and yet he felt a rich satisfaction, a sense of well-being in his bones and gayness, tranquillity of mind.

Four times they decided they must go on to see that film, a super epic of colossal canvas and on a historic theme of the first magnitude, and yet they forgot all about it watching a butterfly settle on her shoulder.

When they got back to the cottage it was still early evening, and there was an hour or so of daylight left. Boy suggested a game of tennis, and they changed into shorts and flannels and walked along to the courts, some half-mile along the road.

There was just the faintest nip in the air to dispel the sultry spell of the day, and they had a brisk game until the shadows began to creep across the lawn and even Boy's strong eyes could no longer see the ball after it had crossed the court.

"I don't know why it is you beat me so often," he grumbled, as they relaxed in their deck-chairs. "I've got a better service and a harder drive and I can tire you out. I can't make it out."

"Maybe because you watch me instead of the ball."

"Oh, nonsense," he laughed, "I can do both with ease." He got up and picked up the racket and a ball. "I've got a good idea, honey! Watch this! See that bird that's just settled on the net? Well, here goes."

He took aim and hit hard. His aim was better than he had wanted it to be. The ball swept the bird clean off the net. It was one of those shots that happen in a thousand, dead accurate because one is not really conscious of aiming at all. Boy had not, of course, meant to hit the bird.

They both hurried to the court. She picked up the bird, who fluttered weakly in her hand.

"Oh, darling, what a pity! You actually hit the poor thing."

"Honey, I didn't mean it. It was simply a fluke. What a rotten shame. Poor little bird, I bet it was scared to death watching that cannon-ball, roughly about the size of its house, come hurtling out of the blue. Is it hurt very badly?"

"Its wings are broken."

They said nothing a moment. They were both upset and he put his arm round her.

"What shall we do?" he said at last.

She said nothing.

"What are you going to do with it?"

She shook her head without answering.

"Honey, I'm so sorry."

They just stood there, helpless and uneasy.

Then she drew a deep breath and shutting her eyes hurled the bird to the ground, where it was killed instantaneously.

What she said made him suddenly become very pale.

"If it can't fly it's better dead."

They walked back to the cottage quietly and, as soon as they were in the gate, she said, "Darling, we forgot our rackets."

He said nothing a moment, then, slowly, "Yes, we have."

"Would you like to get them? Meanwhile I'll make some supper."

But he was strangely unwilling to go.

"Can't we leave them to-night? No one will take them."

"Darling, that's not like you at all. They're expensive rackets and things are difficult to replace. Now run along."

He hung over the gate, hesitatingly, then said, "Come with me, Frieda."

"Yes, of course, darling, if you want me to."

But he didn't say a word to her all the time. When they got

back he was unwilling for her to leave him a moment, even to go to the kitchen.

"But you must be very hungry, Boy."

"I'm not. But if you are I'll come and help you make something."

"Would you rather?"

They went to the kitchen and she opened the pantry briskly.

"I'll make something nice and hot. I've still got some chicken broth. I'll warm that up. Would you like a cutlet after? It will only take about a quarter of an hour."

"No, thanks. Nothing."

She was perplexed and worried. "But why not?"

"I just couldn't eat anything."

"It wasn't the—bird, was it?" she asked, a little surprised.

"No, not *that* in itself."

She was about to ask him something, but intuitively felt he did not want to discuss it.

She hesitated a moment, then said with decision, "I know what you'll have."

She filled a glass with milk, then broke two eggs and mixed them in, added a glass of sherry, and presented it to him with a piece of bread and butter and salt. He took the glass apathetically and sipped, leaving the bread untouched.

"You haven't another glass of sherry?"

"Yes, darling."

He did not notice she had nothing herself and, when they were seated in the little parlour, she did not have the heart to leave him and go into the kitchen, as he seemed to want her beside him all the time. But he hardly said a word to her.

At length he got up and suggested they should make an early night of it.

"No, darling, don't turn on the light," he said as they went up the stairs.

They undressed in the dark and slipped into bed. They lay in each other's arms and listened to the muffled beating of their hearts. With their heads together they could hear their eyelashes brush on the pillow. She felt cool in his arms at first, but gradually she grew warm. She kissed the tip of his nose.

"Bad shot," she said, and giggled. He made no answer.

"Boy. . . ."

"Yes, darling?"

"You are very tired, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. So am I. But it's been such a lovely day." She drew a deep breath and sighed. "I always hate it so when the day is over and I have only a memory."

"There are other days. Many, many days to come."

"How many, I wonder," she said in a small voice.

"If God and Hitler permits, thousands and thousands. . . ."

"Tiny sand," she said. "Memories. Do you know, darling, what there is in Proust that is so wonderful? His ability to live only in the mind which has become a sort of wonderful ever-changing countryside. We never live in the present, do we? We are always planning things, hoping for things, anticipating some future happiness, and as we never succeed in fulfilling our longings we simply go on anticipating that in some future time we shall be truly happy, but of course it never comes. So we live in a fictitious future. On the other hand, when we see something that moves us or hear a voice that lifts our hearts it is never the thing itself that affects us so deeply, it is our association or our memory with it, as with a song or perfume, it strikes a nostalgic note and we remember . . . something we think was very wonderful, but which is so only because we have forgotten the unhappiness that was always with us in those days, because we remember only the things we want to, so you see . . . we only live in a fictitious past. Darling!"

"Yes."

"You are listening?"

"Yes, of course, darling."

"So you see we live, with our hopes, in the future . . . with our memories, in the past . . . but never in the present. Do you see, darling?"

"Yes."

"I'm so tired . . . I can't sleep."

"Ich liebe dich, mein klein."

"Je t'aime . . . ya tibya lublu . . . I adore you."

"Good night, darling."

"Good night."

It was very late when she awoke. For the moment she could not understand the wild beating of her heart. She listened in the darkness, instinctively, for some cry, some voice that had called out to her. Only silence, the grey light flattened on the window, some flowers stirring in a vase. She thought she had been mistaken. Had someone died whom she had loved? A brother, a friend? She had heard of these things.

Then she felt the wet pillow and knew that she had really been awakened by his movement in sleep. She touched the pillow with her hand and then, with a beating heart, his cheek. Both were wet.

"Boy . . . what is it?" she whispered, her voice husky with fright.

"I . . ." he began, and then stopped.

She felt him tremble, his strong young body shake in a weak, dreadful shudder.

"Oh, darling . . . oh, my heart, what is it?"

"I . . ." he choked out, "I . . . didn't mean to kill him, Frieda. . . . F-Frieda . . . I didn't know it would happen. . . . I t-took aim . . . and pressed the gun-button and he went down . . . in silence. H-he crashed in flames . . . an-and he had to be shot, like a dog that had been run over, or th-that poor bird y-you killed af-after I had b-broken its wings."

"Oh, my God!" she cried in sharp grief. "Y-you poor boy!"

"I n-never knew it could be like that. I had shot m-men down be-before . . . but it always l-looked so far away."

"Dar-darling, don't cry, or you'll h-have me crying, too."

"What c-an I do, Frieda? . . . N-no one can t-tell me, can they?"

"No one, darling. Y-you must try to sleep. I'll p-put the light on f-for a little while. It—never l-looks so bad in the l-light."

"D-don't, darling. I feel so bad. I f-felt so f-funny when you killed that poor b-bird and said that."

"There, there, honey. It never l-lasts, that feeling."

"I f-feel like a murderer."

"Y-you're not that, darling, you saved me."

"B-but I am. I—I—never saw the b-boy before and—and—he didn't have anything ag-against me. I d-didn't have any excuse at—at all."

"He would have killed y-you if you hadn't, darling."

"I don't—know wh-what to do, Frieda, I feel so funny and bad in-inside."

"It—it won't last long. . . ."

"Oh, wh-what can I do, Frieda? . . . All—all to-night I felt—so b-bad and—and I w-was trying not to cry—and suddenly j-just n-now I couldn't help it any longer . . . I j-just cried. . . . I'm a m——"

"No, darling, y-you're not. . . . You must not say that, you must not think it. You're not to blame." Her voice had sud-

denly become intensely calm; it seemed to Boy that there was some desperate note in it. "You couldn't help it. You were forced to do it by powers over which you have no control. I know, darling. I *know*."

"Y-yes, you know, my p-poor Frieda. . . ."

They clung to each other.

"I—I'm crying in—in y-your hair, d-darling," he said, and laughed helplessly.

She laughed, too.

"B-but what can I d-do, darling?" he said. "I have felt like th-this all this evening. . . . W-will it l-last long? . . . I c-can't bear it if it will go on like this. N-no one can help, can they?"

"No, darling, n-no one can help. But it won't last long, that feeling. It—it doesn't. S-suddenly you find you h-have grown a sort of armour that protects you. You become hard, darling, because people can't stand that feeling for very long. It won't last very long, darling, it won't. . . . I promise."

"Frieda, d-darling!"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"You belong to me, d-don't you?"

"Yes, darling, we belong to each other."

14

"**W**ELL," said Boy, unable to restrain the anxiety in his voice, "what happened?"

Stavenden said nothing.

"But surely Bill Farson made it?"

Stavenden shook his head.

"What . . . tough luck," muttered Boy.

"It all depends on you, old man," said Stavenden.

"You bet."

"We've got our last hope in you, old chap," said Melville.

Boy nodded, drew a deep breath and walked slowly towards the wicket.

The sixth wicket had fallen in the match between the R.A.F. Southern Command against the Western. So far the Western, who were represented by a Test player and four regular County amateurs, were having it most of their own way. The Southern Command's bowling had been badly mauled during the early part of the day, and now their batsmen with their best men gone had two hundred runs to make; almost an impossible task.

Boy had been marked down as number seven in order to strengthen the tail. He had opposite him, however, Frankie Munro, the great Derbyshire opener, who had gone in as number three and stuck there ever since to make his century with the dogged determination for which he was celebrated.

It was nearly five on a fine day, a gentle wind blew from the Pavilion end, favouring the fast deliveries of Tom Fry, who had taken most of the wickets. He was nursing the ball in his iron hand and grinned owlishly at Boy as the latter approached the wicket.

Boy's presence was greeted with a good deal of applause. He could hear Judith's and Jo Blake's voices above the others inciting him to slaughter the bowling.

As Boy took guard on the off stump he looked round the field at the players, who closed in a little unsuspectingly, and then beyond them to the deck-chairs where his friends sat. He smelt the fresh-cut grass, shooed away a bird that alighted near the crease and nodded to the umpire.

Fry made his dash to the bowling crease and sent his first ball flush for the centre stump. A hush intense with expectation. Boy returned it to the bowler with a loose swing, a safe, sure stroke. There was a sigh of relief. It was nice to feel the smooth contact of the ball in the middle of the bat. He could trust his eye all right, and the life he had led only enhanced his powers of concentration, his control over hand and body.

The next ball he returned once more. He had got the measure of the length. He looked over his shoulder on the leg side. The next ball. It was no different in length, but, if possible, faster. Fry saved his expresses for the third and sixth ball.

Boy jumped in, caught the ball as it rose to meet his bat and cracked it smartly to leg. There was a shout of applause as it flashed to the boundary.

Fry was a little puzzled by this disrespectful treatment of his express, whose aim was to intimidate. He decided to increase the pressure. He took an extra long run and swung his arm with that colt-like movement that impelled it with a special sting. Boy watched it until it met his bat and glanced it prettily through the slips. It shot away, propelled by its initial power straight for the boundary.

The most hardened of the audience sat up.

Fry tossed the ball from hand to hand and met Boy's eye with a quizzical gleam. Boy returned his look with such innocence that Fry was taken aback. The next ball was cut for two.

This was too much. Fry was an old Test player, accustomed to reverent treatment by the veterans of the game. This cocksure youngster must be taught a lesson. He decided that he must be treated as Fry treated the opening batsman of the Australian XI.

Solemnly he took off his cap and handed it to the umpire. He paced back slowly. There was a buzz in the air. Old comrades recognized the gesture. The fielders exchanged glances and the umpire even winked at his confrere.

Boy faced the bowler with a beating heart. What he had decided to do was so revolutionary, so audacious that he was overcome by the thought and wondered at his own daring. But it was Fry who had to be broken down. This bowler had completely routed the team, a rot had set in, three wickets having fallen for ten runs, and unless Fry was knocked quietly or abruptly off his length there would be a collapse. Boy was not the type to proceed quietly. He preferred the more spectacular technique, sustained effort was not part of his temperament, his race had always been the hundred yards dash.

Fry rubbed the ball in the palm of his hand. He tapped with his foot as though to make sure of the spring-board quality of the ground, then tossed the ball in the air thoughtfully once or twice. Boy guessed it was part of his tactics to keep his man in suspense, but even so he could not but feel as though, in a minute, his courage would dwindle down to his boots.

Suddenly Fry ran down to the crease, took a tremendous leap and brought his arm over with a whip-like force, projecting the ball like a bullet towards the leg stump. Boy did not wait for it. He saw it flash forward and, throwing discretion gloriously to the wind, he jumped forward to meet it half-way, deserting his crease with magnificent indifference. But he had calculated speed and flight with perfect timing. He could not see the ball when it struck the pitch, but he knew instinctively where it was, where it *had* to be. He felt a surge of illimitable strength, swung his bat from the shoulder. There was a loud report as though his finger had pressed a trigger and the ball was a red star singing in its skyey flight over the pavilion.

For the first time that afternoon everyone in the crowd was on his feet, shouting.

"Well, old son," said Boy to Jeremy Blake, "it's grand to get together again like this. To look around you one can't believe anything has changed. The same dear old Elizabethan room

with its Nonesuch chest and Spanish galleon, oak and old silver and what not," he said sentimentally. "These are grand chaps, you know. Do you like Ross Haines? He has some of the finest shooting and fishing in the country."

They were smoking and drinking by the window-seat of Blake's house in the country, a stone's throw from the cricket club, and, having replayed some of the old games at school and the university, settled down to discuss old times in general.

Farson and Stavenden were chatting with Judith and Helen Faversham, and the room was filled with a number of other men from the teams with their friends and wives or girls. There was a feeling of relaxation in the air. Ross Haines had found a gramophone and had played them the Londonderry Air ("What, not *that* again"), but nevertheless everyone listened after a few bars. The beer was very good.

It had been a good game, and the bright spot of the day had been Boy's innings. He had not made the top score and had unluckily missed his century by less than ten runs, but it was a very merry knock, had encouraged his side, rejuvenated the game and turned inglorious rout to honourable defeat. It would be a happy memory with Boy.

"Do you know that girl well?" asked Blake with some interest.

"Do you mean Helen Faversham? Fairly well. She's an old friend of Judith."

"Pretty kid," said Blake with a restraint that marked his feelings in the matter. "Why is she so rude to you?"

"Oh, you've noticed that, have you?" laughed Boy. "I used to be interested in her, and one day I—met someone else and gently dropped her."

"You did, eh?" said Blake enviously. "No wonder she goes out of her way to show how indifferent she is to you. I wish she would ignore me like that."

"If you really feel that way I'll go over and pave the way for you if you like."

"All right."

Ross Haines had put on Debussy's 'Clair de Lune'.

As they came over to Helen's corner Stavenden, who made the least thing an excuse to touch her, had helped her up on the bar counter (a very popular feature of Blake's home), where she sat, swinging her legs, talking down at Stavenden.

"Hullo, Helen," said Boy. "Have you met my friend Jeremy Blake?"

"How do you do, Miss Faversham?"

"What a nice polite young man," said Helen, who was nearly ten years Blake's junior.

"You're interrupting a ceremony," said Stavenden. "Go ahead, Helen."

Helen smiled graciously and picking up a cricket bat by the blade said, "Kneel," and Stavenden bowed, his hand on his heart.

She touched him on the shoulder with the handle of the bat, much to the amusement of the others, and said, "Arise, Sir Piers Stavenden."

"What's that for? Have you been spinning your tall stories again?" said Boy.

"I told her how I had guarded her from the Hun," said Stavenden. "Do you want to hear more of my adventures?"

*"There was I,
Thirty thousand feet up—
Upside down,
Hanging from my straps—
Oh, what could I do?"*

hummed Boy.

Helen said, "You're jealous, that's all, Boy Hayward."

"Don't you wish I were," thought Boy, but he merely smiled at her good-humouredly and said, "Now you have three men at your feet, your highness. Steve has saved your honour, Jeremy is willing to put his heart at your feet, can I get you a drink?"

She gave him a haughty smile and shook her head. Then, turning her back to him, she began an animated talk with Stavenden.

Ross Haines put on Ravel's 'Jeux d'eau'.

After a while Jeremy Blake joined in the conversation, and Boy left to talk to Ross Haines, who was more interested in his beloved records.

Judith kissed her brother on the neck and whispered, "Boy, isn't this a lovely party? Your friend Bill Farson has asked me to go for a drive, to have supper later at the Ace of Spades. There's going to be swimming, too, in their pool by moonlight. Won't you please square mamma?"

"Honey, we're all going later. Just the musketeers and Jo. We need Bill's car. Anyway, I couldn't possibly square mother

about you going swimming in the early hours with anybody, you know."

"I feel tiddly," said Judith. "Isn't the cider delicious? It's just like champagne. Isn't Helen having a wonderful time, queening it over them all? I must say you're playing the right game in ignoring her. You'll make it, all right, Boy."

"Who said I wanted to make it?"

"Never mind," she said affectionately. "I'll tell Bill we're all going later on, then."

Ross Haines put on 'Trees'.

"Delightful, what?" he said. "I forgot to offer my congrats on your innings, Hayward. Jolly good show."

"Thanks. Yes, it is rather a charming record. Used to sing it in my bath," he said, grinning.

"Which consecrates it, old chap," muttered Haines.

"Does anyone here fancy himself as an amateur detective?" inquired Melville.

"Every Englishman is a born amateur detective," said Stavenden.

"I've a good game for the blackout. We all turn out the lights——"

"That's a good start," said Bill Farson.

Melville went on to explain the game called Murder.

The girls as well as the men were enthusiastic, and in the next hour or so there was a lot of scuffling on staircases, monopolizing of bedrooms, faint screams and sighs, whispers and laughs.

Boy caught someone in his arms and whispered, "Who is it?"

"Jean. Is that you, Boy? Let me go, please."

"Not before you kiss me."

"Beast!" A laugh. "No, no. I won't. Let me go."

"Come on, Jean."

"I'll tell Harry that you tried to kiss me," she whispered fiercely.

"If you don't I'll tell him you did."

He always got a kiss.

"Who's that?" he whispered, having hunted a feminine form for nearly five minutes, finally trapping it in a bedroom.

"Oh, it's you, Boy," she said. "Go away, you ass."

Boy recoiled from his sister.

After they had played to their heart's content Melville united the party by demonstrating his celebrated egg trick with the assistance of an unpopular hat worn by a very young lady. This pretentious and fantastic hat was unpinned with all the ceremony with which a bishop might disrobe on retiring. Melville had

promised the young lady that he could produce a chicken from an egg.

Everyone kept a perfectly straight face as he broke two eggs and poured their contents into the hat. Judith and Stavenden sighed relief. They watched with solemnity Melville's vain efforts to produce the chicken and lamented his failure, offering their sympathies to the young lady, who held her hat, fascinated by the mashed yolks it contained, quite unable to believe her eyes.

The men went on to cocktails and the girls finished several bottles of wine and cider. Everybody was soon talking at once.

"Good show, Hayward," said Melville. "Between ourselves I thought you were a bit of a goof. I did not know you had your blue for cricket. I was at Granchester in '35."

"Oh, it was jam being missed in the slips at thirty," said Boy. They went on to relive and replay other games.

It was nice to wander light-heartedly from group to group, swapping stories, ragging, flirting with the girls, pausing now and then to exchange political profundities with Murray, sentimental inanities with Jean, Christine or Irene, tall stories with Bill Farson. It gave him a sense of release he had not known for a long time.

Flushed and warm-eyed, he said to Haines, "Play 'Stardust'. It used to be a favourite of mine."

"This is a pretty decent crowd, Hayward. I like your friend Blake."

"We're all going to the Ace of Spades for supper and a midnight bathe. Will you come?"

"Of course."

"Only difficulty is in transport. We need two big cars. Mel's is only a two-seater."

"Pity mine is laid up. Can't you get that Daimler I saw in the drive? Whose is it?"

"Belongs to my Uncle Godfrey. Just wait. I'll fix him."

Ross Haines put on 'Stardust'.

"Hullo, uncle, having a good time?" said Boy.

"Why, yes, of course. Brings back the old days, doesn't it, Boy? Your aunt has had too much cider. Come and talk to me. I want a word with you."

He drew him aside and said very quietly, "Well, my boy, what's the score?"

"Just eight short of my hundred, uncle. But I had some luck in being missed in the slips at thirty."

"No, Boy," said Charwell with a pale smile. "What's the score?"

"Thirteen, sir. And three probables."

"Thirteen!"

Charwell nodded gravely and pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"Thirteen!" he repeated. "Thir-teen! And I remember giving you your first Meccano set."

Boy smiled uncomfortably.

"Thirteen! That makes you an ace, doesn't it?"

Boy fidgeted. "I don't know. Not really. Lots of fellows have done miles better than that. Ross Haines and Steve—that's Piers Stavenden—and Neil Murray—they're the real aces, sir. Murray has brought down twenty-six, I believe. I'll ask him. Neil!"

"Yes?"

"What's your bag? Twenty-six and eight probables, isn't it?"

"I don't know. I forgot."

"Ross Haines has brought down as many, I think, uncle. Ross, what's your score?"

"Score, old boy?"

"Yes, how many aircraft?"

"Do be quiet and listen to this, old chap. Do you like Chopin, sir?"

"Yes, I do," said Charwell.

"I shall play the Polonaise for you then." He regulated the instrument and listened with his eyes closed.

"I'll ask Piers Stavenden. Piers!"

"Hallo?"

"What's your bag?"

"I can't hear you. That damned gramophone."

"What's your bag?"

"What's in my bag?"

"No. What's your bag?"

"What's in my bags? Don't be a vulgar little boy."

"Come on, you can hear me all right."

"Grand spirit," said Charwell, and took out his cigar-case.

"Grand spirit."

"I'm going with the chaps for a late supper at the Ace of Spades, uncle."

"That's right, Boy. Have a damn good time while you can. Wish I was young enough to go with you. Like to borrow my car?"

"Can you manage?"

"Of course, my boy, of course."

"I shall now play you the Choral movement from the Ninth Symphony by Beethoven."

"No, you won't," said Bill Farson. "Nothing doin'."

"All right, then. Will you have 'Waltzing Matilda', played by the Coldstream Guards?"

"That's more like it."

"For you, then, Bill."

Boy and Jeremy Blake returned to their window-seat.

"I see you've got some new acquisitions to the place," said Boy. "I don't remember seeing that picture. What is it?"

"It's a medieval subject. A unicorn and a virgin in a blue field. Gives the right atmosphere, I feel. You haven't seen this figurine, have you? St. George jousting. Solid silver. His lance is a bit battered, but that's as it should be."

"This is a dear old place. I always envied you."

"You know it's yours, old chap."

"I see you still hang on to my imitation Egyptian vase."

"Do you remember last time we sat here and talked about things?"

Boy sniffed the air that was laden with jasmine.

"It's a good idea, this candle-light," said Boy. "And it looks nice reflected in that walnut grand."

"I hang on to the old things," said Blake.

"They do mean a hell of a lot, don't they?" said Boy.

"Anything the matter, old chap?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Come on, you can tell me, you know."

"No . . . nothing, Jo."

After a time Boy said, "Look, there's Helen all by herself in the garden. All alone! Can I believe my eyes?"

"Has the queen chosen to dissolve parliament?"

"Why don't you go out to her, Jo?"

"I wouldn't have the nerve. She wants to be alone."

"Not when she strikes that attitude. She knows a dozen pair of hungry eyes are watching her."

"You go out, Boy."

"No."

"Why not?"

"What's the use?"

"It's your choice, Hayward, old chap. What is it to be? May I play you Romance in A Flat?"

"You may," said Boy.

"For you, then, Boy. Romance in A Flat."

Boy strolled into the garden.

"Hallo, your highness," he said, pulling off a red rose for her.

"I don't want it," she said. "I only wear red roses."

"But it is red."

"How can you tell? It's dark."

"A white one would show up even in this light. It must be red, therefore."

"I still don't want it."

"My dear Helen, please don't be unfriendly. There's no cause for it, is there?"

"Oh, no."

"Why can't we just remain friends, then?"

"I don't know. I couldn't with you."

"Why on earth not?"

"Boy," she said quietly after a short pause, "why did you stop coming to see me?"

"My dear girl, I had asked you half a dozen times to come out with me, and each time you said pappa wouldn't allow it. Now you blame me for not asking you."

"You understand perfectly well that has nothing to do with it. I am very annoyed with you, Boy. I didn't offend you in any way, did I?"

"No, of course not."

"I know you haven't got tired of me, because I didn't give you a chance!"

"Quite right."

She caught her breath. "It's all your fault."

"What is?"

She said nothing. Then: "Am I very silly, Boy? Do you find me rather—young?"

"No, dear. But I would give a word of advice: don't try so hard to appear old. You try just a wee bit too much."

"I think you're crude and insulting."

"I'm sorry if you think that."

"You do think I'm too young, then?"

"If you like, yes."

"You're just a beast."

"My dear, you did ask me——"

"Don't say another word! Why do you think I'm too young?"

"Don't be silly," said Boy shortly, "you're not really too young at all. In any case it is a fault that can be remedied inevitably in the course of events."

"In that case it's perfectly beastly of you to drop me like this—without a word of explanation. I know you haven't another girl."

"How do you know?"

"Well, Judith—that is, people would have heard in two shakes and—well, not that I'm interested!"

"My dear Helen, can't we be friends?"

"No," she said, "never! Not after the way you treated me!" Then she added in a different tone, "Besides, I prefer my friends to be sincere."

"That's not fair, Helen."

"Please go."

"Oh, all right. If you want to be huffy."

She turned and walked off, without another word.

"Helen," he called. "I took the liberty of bringing your bathing suit. You forgot we planned to go moonlight bathing."

"Thank you," she said distantly, then, "not my black one, I hope."

"No, the blue and cream. I thought it would suit you better."

"You seem to take an intelligent interest in what I look like."

"I don't deny it."

"Oh, all right, come along, then. I'm not really cross with you, Boy."

Boy smiled to himself. His imperturbable good temper always acted as a soothing balsam. He was still latently attracted to Helen, and besides he didn't want anything to upset the serene warmth of the party. Boy liked parties, looked forward to them, took care that there was a harmonious atmosphere, planned for them; he didn't see why people should be quarrelsome, petty and angry, could see no reason for it; he always avoided controversial subjects or anything that might offend people. Some people selfishly made provocative remarks or were too serious; for his own part, Boy did not mind, but when these things upset other people Boy wondered why they hadn't the sense to drop the subject; after all, as though it really mattered whether one talked about these things or not—that wouldn't change anything, and the party was the thing. It was for that reason that Boy had spoken to Helen. He could see that unless he made it up with her she would upset the whole friendly spirit of the party; he meant to have a good time, and he did.

"I WONDER where we are," he said.

"Mm. What?"

"Where are we?"

"Don't know. Go to sleep, darling."

"I'll just have a scout round and see if there's a signpost somewhere. Oh, hell!"

"What's the matter?"

"I forgot. All the signs have been wiped off. Now we'll never know."

"Why," she said, yawning, "do you want to know, anyway?"

"I don't know. Just a prejudice, I suppose. I always like to know where I am."

"You're in a little road on the way to somewhere in England, that highly mysterious spot. You're sitting in Mr. Bill Farson's car beside your true love. I believe we're near a stream because it's been making gurgling noises too long to be your tummy."

"It's pretty here, and I tell you what—we're on an incline. Look, when I switch the headlights on the light goes on into space. It looks as though we're hanging in mid-air. I can only see the sky."

"Maybe we are just in mid-air. I've been thinking, darling."

"What?"

"I wonder what's beyond the end."

"What end?"

"Well, the end of distance. What's beyond the sky?"

"Nothing, I suppose."

"I know—but one must still be able to go farther. You come to the end of the sky—what then? You must still be able to go on into space. You can go on and on until you've travelled so many more millions of light years, but there still must be something beyond *that*."

"Ye-es," he said, yawning voluminously, "but that doesn't get you anywhere, that argument. All one can say is that space is infinite."

"Exactly, that's what I was coming to. Space, being infinite, we're not nearer or farther the end wherever we are."

"That is so."

"In that case," she said triumphantly, "when we've travelled between two points, being no nearer or farther the end, we haven't moved at all. Therefore it doesn't matter how far we go we don't get anywhere at all."

"That's an illusion," he yawned, "based on a fallacy. But," he yawned, "you've made your point. I no longer care where we are, now that you've established I can't be anywhere near anywhere."

She rubbed her face sleepily against his shoulder.

"I wonder what the time is," he said.

"What do you want to know for?"

"Now," he said, "don't you start that again."

He switched on the torch. "Great Scott, it's nearly morning. Well, three-thirty-five, anyway. It's too late to get anywhere before morning."

"Do you mind, darling? I suppose you'll have to get a good night's rest for to-morrow."

"No, I don't mind, honey."

"But you're on duty and——"

"I'll be all right, bless you. Darling, we'll be able to do what I've longed to do all this summer—stay up to see the dawn. And with you, too, pigeon."

"It was a lovely ride, wasn't it?"

"Yes, except for your singing, which was supposed to have kept me from falling asleep at the wheel. Don't you know music always makes me fall asleep? I snore at the first strains of the masters."

"Yes, that was a narrow squeal."

"*Squeak*," he corrected mechanically.

"Narrow *squeak*," she rehearsed softly. "Darling, how much does an aeroplane weigh? A bomber? Narrow *squeak*. Narrow *squeak*."

"About twenty odd tons. A heavy one. Why?"

"Oh, dear, I've lost my bet. I had an argument with the girl at the hairdresser's that it weighs about ten pounds. How can it float in the air if it's so heavy? Narrow *squeak*."

"Oh, darling, on that principle I must weigh about four ounces, as I, too, float in air."

"Isn't it sad? Now the girls at the hairdresser's won't respect me any more. They ask me about the R.A.F. every time I go there, and I answer them solemnly as I am vain to think that they look on me as an authority. Alas, I will be a laughing-stock."

"I should think so, indeed. Ten pounds! Hoh, hoh!"

His laughter woke the birds and there was a scared outcry and the beating of wings amongst the foliage.

"Oh, you've frightened the birds," she lamented. Then she

said with tenderness, "I do adore birds and all small things."

"Do you, pet?" he said sleepily. "Now, honey, let's get some sleep."

"Don't you?"

"What?"

"Adore small things."

"Yes, yes. Now go to sleep."

"Children?"

"What?"

"Do you like children?"

"Not much. They're a bore."

"Oh!" she said, shocked. She was silent a minute or two, recovering from this assault on her tender moment. "Oh!" she said indignantly, but he was fast asleep.

He woke with the sun racing over the wind-screen in bright whitish lances. He did not move, not wishing to wake her. She was fast asleep, and in the early light looked very beautiful with her soft dark hair framing her face with the pallor induced by sleep. Her eyelids had the faint blue of watered milk and their long lashes quivered faintly at the sunlight; her mouth was slightly open, giving her a childish pout; the delicate features were limned as cleanly as a cameo on a coin; her brow was very smooth. She seemed to be at once infinitely young, innocent and helpless. He could not help giving her an involuntary caress, and she opened her eyes a whole moment without seeing him, muttered something inaudible, and then closed them, without having awakened.

"All right, sleep tight then, darling," he whispered, kissing her head gently.

For a time he amused himself by suggesting certain thoughts to her, which he whispered quietly in her ear. His name featured prominently amongst these communications, but apparently her unconscious mind was not receptive to these indications and she seemed to show no sign of dreaming about fantastic peaches, Uncle Sam on a penny-farthing bicycle, being swallowed by a whale or of him. He gave it up and watched a fly settle on her nose. She wrinkled it indignantly, cursed sleepily in French, sneezed gently, woke up for a moment and stared at him so solemnly that he could hardly control his laughter. But she sighed, smiled sleepily and relapsed into unconsciousness.

The countryside was very beautiful on this autumn morning, and the air throbbed continuously with the rich throaty call of

dozens of birds who wheeled in graceful light-hearted movements amongst the fat white clouds, or so it seemed. The green fields were alive with dew that glittered radiantly. He felt the faint pumping of her heart beneath his hand as he embraced her more tightly, and for a while watched the rise and fall of her breast under the loose dress. He sat for nearly an hour, unwilling to break the spell of contentment, and at last tried to wake her as gently as he could. He kissed her warm weak mouth until it trembled and the muscles awoke.

"Still sleepy, honey?"

"Yes, a little. . . ."

"You looked so sweet I did not want to wake you."

"Darling, what patience. Hasn't your arm gone to sleep?"

"A thousand times. It's absolutely dead."

"What fortitude. And aren't you hungry and thirsty?"

"Starved."

"What self-sacrifice. Was it worth all that?"

"Every bit of it."

"What gallantry."

"Did you dream at all? You had the look of a Madonna listening to stars singing in their courses."

"I had an absolutely dreadful dream."

"Did you! Was it about eating peaches and turnips?"

"No——"

"No, no, let me guess! Was it about me?"

"No."

"About being swallowed by a whale?"

"What on earth——! No."

"Oh," he said, disappointed, "then it didn't work!"

"What didn't?" she said suspiciously.

"You didn't by any chance dream you were being chased by an elderly gentleman on a penny-farthing bicycle?"

"No, I didn't! Why, I do believe you were up to something! Were you making suggestions to me whilst I was asleep?"

"No, not at all," he said innocently.

"You beast!" she said. "No wonder you were so long in waking me!" She tried to pull his ears and he struggled with her, laughing.

He got out of the car with difficulty. He had a slight cramp in his left leg and his arm was so stiff he could hardly move it. He smelt the air so forlornly that she laughed.

"No bacon and eggs, darling?"

"I tell you what, Frieda, I'm going to throw you in that stream."

"No, no. You'll make me all wet," she said with genuine alarm as he seized her in his arms and lifted her clean out of the car.

"What an absurd notion. Honey, we're miles off the beaten track. Let's have a dip. Then we can dry ourselves by racing in the meadow."

"No, darling . . . it will be very cold."

"Go along, darling. Get behind the bushes and I'll throw you a bunch of leaves when you're ready."

"Don't be absurd——"

"All right. Have it your own way. With or without your smart new georgette blouse. Take your choice. What is it to be? Dishonour or getting your clothes spoiled?"

She chose 'dishonour'. He was already in the grey, swift-flowing stream when she appeared on the bank, testing the chilly water with a hesitant bare foot.

He seized it quickly and pulled her in with a wild Indian call. She beat frenziedly in the water against his efforts to duck her. Afterwards they both ran, hands joined, in an adjoining meadow. The sun was mild and the air fresh.

"Darling, I can't run any more. It's all prickly."

"Prickly!" he mimicked, and dragged her on until she was quite out of breath. Suddenly she stopped with a sharp cry.

"Honey, what's up?"

"I cut my foot. Look, you beast, it's bloody."

"Blood-stained."

"Bloody or blood-stained, it's cut."

She had indeed scratched her foot on a sharp blade of grass. She sat down on a thick clump of grass and wild flowers whilst he examined the cut.

"It hurts."

"No, it doesn't. It's a mere scratch."

"Do you think it's poisoned?"

"Baby," he jeered. He took the delicate pale foot in his hands, it was very small and nicely formed and the skin was silky, and at the moment the scent of grass clung to it. He bent down and healed the cut with his lips.

For a little while she said nothing. She lay in the couch of thick grass and soft-petalled flowers, drops of water clinging in her hair and setting it on fire in the sunlight. Her shoulders and breasts were still damp in spite of their exercise in the sun. He plucked handfuls of the wild flowers and, after rubbing them

between his hands until they were quite dry, he wiped her shoulders with them and then finished the task of drying her with vigorous movements until she glowed, and a dry disturbing fragrance clung to her skin, a wild scent that excited him. Then he threw away the crushed drooping flowers that had served this function of a towel and, bending down, kissed her shoulders, which were warm and smooth with the friction, and breathed the heady perfume.

She clasped his neck with a quick impetuous movement.

"Darling . . ." she whispered after a while, "do you think it can last . . . this sort of love that just carries us away?"

"How can you ask?" he said, his lips on hers.

At that moment he could have promised her anything and believed it.

Some time later he took her back to the bank of the stream and they slowly dressed. While she was putting on her shoes she leaned heavily, sighing, on his shoulder, her head bent. He helped her to dress.

They got into the car and he hesitated a few moments, then said: "Got it."

"Got what?"

"The sun's on our left, this road leads at right angles to it almost, the time is ten past seven. I shouldn't be surprised if we can get to the by-pass within a quarter of an hour if we keep the sun just on our right all the time."

"What a navigator! You don't even need the stars, do you, darling?" she said with affectionate amusement. "The man who always knows where he is. If they landed you by parachute on Mars you'd know where you were as soon as you'd picked yourself up."

In spite of the jocular manner he was quite pleased. It was always a matter of pride with him, this practical grasp he always retained.

"Now," he said, as they pulled up, some twenty minutes later, outside a well-known road-house, "you see why I wanted to know where I was. Bacon and eggs and hot coffee."

"Well . . . I would have been content to have just a kiss and a glimpse of sunlight for breakfast."

"Says you!"

It was almost empty at this early hour. They sat on cane chairs by the low window and the waiter brought them newspapers with their breakfast.

"Have you any sugar, darling?" she asked.

He sighed. "Yes, here you are." He took some lumps from an envelope.

"Any hairpins?"

"As it happened, I did remember to pick them up for you," he said.

"Darling, you're wonderful."

But she had the last laugh on him. He slapped his knee with exasperation. "Darling!"

"What?" she said.

"I've run short of money. I forgot to go to the bank."

"Aha!" She smiled mockingly and opened her purse with deliberate slowness. "I'll see what I can do for you. Will a pound be enough?"

"Ample. No, that's a ten-shilling note. One of those *green* ones, silly."

They read their papers. After some time she put hers down and said, "Boy, talk to me, please."

"Just one moment whilst I finish this article."

"Really, darling, and you say you love me!"

"I love you, only I just don't feel like discussing the advantages of water over air-cooled Rolls-Merlin engines with you."

"Well!" She turned to her paper once more.

"Darling," she said, a little shocked, "who is this atheist writer who always makes fun of the clergy?"

"Clergy?"

"Well, you know, people like this Donald Bradman. He is a church dignitary, isn't he?"

This knock-out blow proved too much for him. At last he explained. "Darling, Don Bradman is a famous cricketer, a sportsman."

"But why do people always refer to him in such reverent terms?"

"Well, you know, cricket is a national institution. It's all very well for people to make fun of it, but it has become a serious thing in the lives of English people. The Germans may laugh at it, but heck, better for us to take an innocent game seriously than to bring up the young men of the country in the tradition of bloodshed. Our national institution may be a little comical, but theirs is tragic. Some years ago a team went over to Australia and a new type of bowling was introduced, the ball being aimed on the leg side of the batsman. Well, do you know, darling, that the Australian people were so annoyed by this unorthodox play that there were government measures taken, and for a time diplo-

matic relations between Britain and Australia were severely strained. Well, that may seem absurd to you, but think of the way the Germans provoke similar diplomatic ruptures on the Continent—assassination, slaughter of innocent national minorities, frontier incidents involving the lives of hundreds of harmless people! No! What I always maintain is that one obscure cricket captain in a village team is worth all the Clauswitzes, von Moltkes and Keitels put together, and the emblem of the cricket bat is worth all the eagles, red of beak and claw, that feature on German flag-days.” He threw his paper down. “I’m not fanatical in my political views, I’m not a religious mystic, even the King is only a figurehead to me. As far as these things are concerned, all I can say is that everybody is entitled to think what he likes. If the people want Socialism one of these days, all right—if there is an electoral majority for it, I won’t oppose the government of Socialism when it comes: it’s the will of the people freely expressed at the polls. If they vote for another type of government, whatever opinions I may hold, once the government of the majority is freely elected, I will be loyal to it. Politics, religion . . . about these matters I prefer to reason calmly, see the other fellow’s point of view if I can, and be loyal to my belief in the democratic principle of the free expression of the will of the majority. But there is one thing I am fanatical about—and that is our national spirit of sportsmanship. I can thank God that we English believe in fair play—that is, the people in our country worthy of that name. Wilberforce, who championed the cause of the negro slaves, the Trade Union martyrs who wanted fair play for the workers. . . . ‘Justice’ is any country’s legal system, fair play does not recognize national boundaries, is at once higher in spirit and more down-to-earth in application. If you want an Englishman to fight a war you don’t appeal to his lust for new territories or possessions, you’ve got to say, ‘Look! Poor little Belgium is being bullied by Germany!’ or ‘Poor Poland is invaded by the mechanized might of the Hun!’”

“Darling,” she said incredulously, “what oratory, what fire! I never dreamed you had it in you! Just before you go on, though, there’s one little thing I must mention. I don’t like the look of your egg.”

“What’s the matter with it?”

“Looks a bit green.”

She took some on her fork and ate it, shook her head. “No, you must not eat it. Tell the waiter to take it away.”

Suddenly he caught her eye, and there was such a look of

intimacy and understanding that for a moment they were both dumb; it was a rare moment such as only friends in complete harmony feel at times. She blushed with pleasure at his look and her eyes dwelt softly on him.

"Well, aren't you going on with your speech?"

"Oh, I've said enough," he muttered shortly, and picked up his paper in embarrassment. He fingered it idly a moment and then said, suddenly, "And what do you believe in, Frieda?"

She looked perplexed and thoughtful a moment, and then said with conviction, "Well, darling, I know you *believe* in what you say, but too often politicians fool people, take advantage of their sense of chivalry and gallantry and—and love of battle. I don't believe in politics to-day at all. I can't understand them and I don't pretend to. I suppose I believe in just helping people as best one can. I remember that once, in Vienna, I passed a very poor man in the street who was standing at the corner, trying to pluck up courage to beg, but being afraid of the police, and I thought, 'Why he hasn't the right even to beg, to debase himself.' I gave him a few notes, and my friend, Marie—she was a very nice girl, mind you—said, 'Fancy giving him so much money, Frieda. You're mad! You simply don't know the value of money!' That was it, the value of money! Those little pieces of dirty paper had, in her view, more value than the life of a man. I suppose, though, I am unpractical; I suppose money is important, but I always looked upon it as being a joke; how can one take pieces of paper so seriously! Once I found a very dirty note—it must have passed through a thousand hands—it was almost falling to pieces, and I threw it away! I'd rather lose its value than touch it! Well, I know what you must think of such behaviour, but God knows, I've been punished enough!

"But I suppose that really what I believe in is—don't smile at this, darling—a sort of creative love. I'm not much good at making things, calculating. Although I feel many things deeply, that is, I have an eye for pretty things, an ear for nice music, can understand the thoughts of others and appreciate their achievements and ideals, I'm no good at making anything myself. Look at my hands . . . how useless they are . . . and I have no ability to reckon, to plan. . . . I'm a sorry, rather useless thing on the whole, wandering rudderless . . . but when I find someone I love, I feel at anchor, a sort of harmony at last, and I find resources of strength and discipline in myself I never dreamed of . . . and I can sympathize, cherish, encourage, soothe and please.

. . . I feel a great happiness then, a will to live, I seem to find myself at last. . . . I'm rather nervous physically. I suppose you've noticed that. But I honestly feel that I can go through fire to help or please. But I have talked far too much and embarrassed you, darling."

Boy was greatly flattered and embarrassed by her words, and she quickly changed the subject. They talked of other things, but the feelings invoked by these confessions of faith and declarations shone through their lightest words.

They had sat a long time now, and decided to order fresh coffee. The sun shone in their faces, they stretched their legs, smoked, chatted, and then finally swapped papers and finished another pot of coffee together, occasionally mentioning something of interest. At last Boy called for the bill, and they sat, finishing their last cigarettes, having read both papers right through and talked to their heart's content.

"Well?" he said at last, pressing her foot under the table.

"Well, you . . . ?" she answered, not making a move however.

Suddenly he saw her look sharply beyond him to the door. Boy turned and saw, entering the café, his sister, Judith, Helen Faversham, Irene Manners, and just behind them Bill Farson, Murray and Piers Stavenden. They were all carrying tennis kit and seemed in a bright mood. Nobody noticed Boy and, after a great deal of cheerful clatter, they pulled up two tables by the window-seat at the other side of the room.

Frieda did not look at him a moment, but said, "That's your friend Neil, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Boy carelessly. He did not meet her eye a moment. "Well, dear, shall we make a move?"

"Aren't you going to say 'hallo' to him?"

"He looks busy."

"Mightn't he think it rude?"

"No, of course not."

There was a brief silence, and then she said, "I think you had better go over. Someone's waving to you."

He turned and saw Judith waving her racket at him.

"I'll just be a moment, Frieda."

As she said nothing he got up and went over.

"Hallo," said Bill Farson. "Fancy! Well, sonnie, aren't you going to tell us all about her?"

Boy avoided his eye. "Hallo, sis. Playing this morning?"

"Yes. . . . I say, I like your girl. She looks rather sweet."

"What are you doing this morning? Does your girl play tennis?" asked Helen Faversham.

"Yes, she does as a matter of fact."

There was a short pause.

"What are you standing up for?" said Judith.

"We were just going."

"If you've no special plans, why not join us? We're six. We could do with eight for a couple of mixed doubles," said Helen.

"What about it?" said Bill. "I'd like to meet the girl."

"You keep your eye on the ball when you play with me, Bill Farson," said Judith. "But seriously, Boy, why not? We'd like to meet her."

"And later we're all planning to go for a picnic lunch," said Helen.

"Come on, don't stand there like a goof," bullied his sister. "You know you're dying to show off your fast service."

Boy looked from Judith to Murray. The latter met his eye quietly. Boy could not make out what he was thinking. Then he turned to his sister.

"I don't think we'll join you, sis. We've made other plans already. Bye-bye."

As he went back to their table he began to feel in his pockets for cigarettes. He knew that if he could only occupy himself with something, even lighting a cigarette, he might hide something of his agitation.

"Ready, Frieda?"

"Yes."

They went out together. As they passed near the others' table, Murray caught Frieda's eye and saluted her, smiling. She returned his smile and walked out quickly.

They said nothing till they were in the car. He breathed in the smoke hurriedly and fumbled for the self-starter.

"Who were they?" she said at last.

"Oh—nobody special. I didn't want to stop. Did you? Besides, they'd made up a crowd to play tennis."

The engine woke and the car moved off. A little later she said to him suddenly, "That girl who waved to you—she's your sister, isn't she?"

Boy's hands gripped the steering-wheel tightly. He was flung right off his balance by the remark. (How on earth could she tell, anyway? Boy was fair and had inherited all his mother's features; Judith, on the other hand, had only her mother's mouth.)

"My sister—yes, how can you tell?"

"Something about the expression."

For some time they said nothing.

Suddenly she said in a quiet, tense voice he had never heard before, "Do be careful . . . you nearly crashed into that cart just now."

16

"I SAY, Hayward, have a look at this, will you? It's fitted to our new Spitter," said Murray.

"Shall I test it?"

"Go ahead."

Murray gave orders for the flying field to be cleared as Boy got into the aircraft.

"What height?"

"About a couple of hundred feet."

Boy took his machine up to that height and then, circling over the flying field, dropped the new cannon over the side of his cockpit. It made a cavity in the hard ground.

Then Murray picked up the weapon and went round the back of the aerodrome.

"Well, does it still work?" said Boy when he got out of his machine.

"Runs smooth as a watch."

Murray broke open the gun and examined the shells in their smooth sockets, patted it and grinned. "It will be a nice surprise."

"Yes, it will," said Boy, and lit a cigarette.

"I say, Neil," he said.

"What?"

"How long do you think this is going on for?"

"Not much longer."

"You said that a month ago. Tell me. I don't mind. It's those youngsters I'm thinking of. How long will they have to stand it? It's hell we haven't proper reserves. Young Digby ought never to have been sent up five times in as many raids."

"Let's see—how long is it since they began? I remember. No, they can't keep it up at this pace. They'll have to switch to night raids."

"You said that a m——"

"Okay, I said it."

They went in to the wing commander's office and talked about the new cannon. In less than five minutes the phone rang.

The wing commander said, "A squadron of bombers . . . Heinkels . . . escorted by one squadron of fighters."

Murray said nothing.

"Well?"

"I think it's a diversion raid, sir. I'll go up with a couple of men and keep them off."

"That won't do, Neil. This is a proper attack."

"I'm convinced it's a diversion raid. I only need two men."

"Nonsense. You can't do it."

"I don't want to take up more than two men."

"Don't be so damned obstinate. Do as you're told. This is a job for the whole squadron."

Murray got up. He was trembling with rage.

"Come on, Hayward."

As soon as they set off Murray got through on the radio-telephone and gave orders for Boy and Farson to increase to full speed and start climbing. The rest of the squadron were to proceed at half speed.

Boy no longer felt anything. He nursed the stick gently, watching the sable and cream clouds, saw his shadow race gigantically over a low layer. He thought of nothing much.

He was as at home as in his armchair.

"I say, Neil."

"Yes?"

"Let me try my gambit."

"What's the matter? Want to be a hero?"

"Oh, come on, Neil. You promised."

"Stow it, Boy. You're barmy," said Farson.

"You've got the lines crossed, mister. Get off the line. Come on, Neil."

"It's no good. There's not a chance in a hundred."

"That's the only chance worth taking."

"I said no."

"You're an obstinate tyke, aren't you? Want to bag all the credit for yourself."

"In time to come this gambit will be known as the Hayward Touch," babbled Farson.

"You get off the line, you cradle-snatcher."

"It's no good, Boy," said Murray.

It was the first time he had called him by his Christian name. Boy flushed and felt at last he had broken down the reserve of

this man. He thought Murray was weakening, and pressed home, "There's only one escorting squadron. This leaves the bombers unprotected from below. You say yourself there won't be many more raids, so I might never get this chance again. Come on, Neil. Let's have a crack at them."

"This is poetic justice, isn't it? The old man wanted me to take the whole squadron when I told him I needed two men. Now you want to attack them all by yourself."

"Maybe if we get them on the air and tell them not to come to-day as we're playing cards they'll go home like good little gentlemen," said Farson.

"Well, watch my smoke," said Boy happily. "I'm off."

"I shouldn't let you go, Boy, but good luck, and if you break your perishing neck I'll be very annoyed."

Boy grinned and made a kissing sound.

He pulled the stick back, adjusted his oxygen mask and climbed to ceiling. He opened his machine out absolutely to full speed, and in a few seconds had left the others behind. He kept his eyes on the horizon.

He felt as pleased as Punch with himself. When he thought about it he wondered at his own cheek. Only a few months ago he had had to be nursed by two fighters in his action against a solitary enemy aircraft. . . . He thought, "What a bloody fool I am to take this on," and grinned.

The Hayward Touch, though? Farson said that, not he.

Boy was an ace, a veteran ace. The unconscious pride he took in his aircraft, his intimate knowledge of its mood, the sense of ease he felt in the sky, flying, diving, hanging upside down on his straps, his feeling of oneness with his aircraft, all this was manifest in his every gesture. Unconsciously he listened to the engine whilst his experienced eye read the instruments on his dashboard at a glance, a cabbalistic formula of direction, speed, height, fuel; he knew the aircraft like a comrade in arms, read it like a book; he could brandish it in the sky like a sword in the hand of an expert fencer, sweep the air and with one stroke cut down a foe. He liked the feeling it gave him, liked to nurse the controls.

He did not think anything of odds; he thought only of fuel and reserves of ammunition. There was room in the sky to dodge out of the most ominous ring of enemies. He had learned to calculate by instinct, to make a plan of campaign hanging suspended upside down when the blood was running into his head; he was up to every trick in the game, could recognize the feint,

the decoy, the simulated dive out of control. He could spot the veteran and the inexperienced flier. Nothing was new to him any longer, even to be shot down. He was not worried; a little parcel of silk guarded the last line of retreat.

It was hard to watch the faces of the youngsters and the novices, it was a grand feeling to know that they looked up to him, relied on him in tight corners. Their dependence gave him courage when things looked hopeless.

He was the most reliable man in the squadron. He would never make a flier of genius like Stavenden, who fed on adversity and grew intoxicated, possessed; he had not the love of battle of Bill Farson or the technical skill of Murray; his outstanding gift was his thorough knowledge of the chances in each engagement. He was not the least bit abashed from running away from overwhelming odds, and he would take a chance whenever there was a reasonable one; he never became carried away, never rose to supreme heights, but he was cool, quick and knew exactly what to do in any situation. Stavenden was rather contemptuous of his tactics, accusing him of flying by the book. Stavenden had once bailed out a second before deliberately ramming his blazing machine into the side of a Dornier, had hedge-hopped for twenty minutes along the enemy coastline under the noses of the greatest concentration of ground defences in France; whenever he got caught in a searchlight he scorned to play at hide-and-seek and would dive straight down the beam to machine-gun the battery. Farson, too, did not take Boy seriously; he loved a good hard fight, would ignore a novice and would tackle any odds; he liked to think there was chivalry in air combat and never shot at a foe who had run short of ammunition. He was a regular barn-stormer and outraged the command by his air-stunting. Once he flew his machine through the foliage of eight trees in succession, aiming his aircraft like a bullet through an ever-narrowing aperture in the network of leaf and branch.

But it was Boy who had been given the task of finding the range for the home batteries on that memorable day when the abortive invasion rehearsal had cost the Germans thousands of dead and wounded. He had been sent up to calculate the exact position of the enemy barges over a sky swarming with fighters. The Germans had set up a screen in the sky. Boy had wrestled with gigantic odds, seeking refuge in the clouds, had faced the fire of hundreds of anti-aircraft shells that stormed every hiding-place. He made his calculations, reported them, and only then hared back for home. The accuracy of his report was confirmed

in the havoc the coastal batteries made of the enemy barges.

After that Boy faced any odds with equanimity. He had become unconsciously quite convinced that nothing could harm him; death seemed farther away than at any time. He had seen fighters shot down all about him, aircraft mangled and blazing like a furnace; they were all remote, inexplicably detached from him.

It was such qualities of judgment, even temper and a certain tenacious power of will that supported him through a campaign of an intensity that had never been paralleled in the history of aerial warfare. His control never failed him; his defence-equipment was complete and his equilibrium never disturbed. Seeing a cork floating in a basin of water he once thought, "It doesn't matter if it is thrown into the waters of the whole Pacific, it will still float." He was a self-contained unit, so self-supporting that he could deal with any situation unaided. The only time he lost his nerve was when he was with a nervous flier. He had to extricate him from such an awkward situation that he vowed that he would never ask anyone's help in a tight corner. He was convinced that Stavenden would get killed one day, that Farson would crack up under the self-imposed strain of facing combat with odds more than four to one. The only flier whom Boy looked up to was Murray, whose skill was that of a virtuoso. Murray's aircraft swept the sky like a scythe, he never wasted a shot, never stunted; his machine ran as on rails. He was absolutely thorough, almost to the point of fanaticism, before taking up a new aircraft, putting it through every test, examining every instrument minutely, personally supervising fuelling, oiling and arming. He said he did not mind taking chances, but objected to them being unnecessary. Stavenden said, "Whereas Hayward flies as though he's driving a tram, you behave as though you've got a family of ten and haven't paid your last premium on the insurance policy." Murray said, "You Flying Dutchman, when are you going to down that Catholic conscience of yours? You don't fight Nazis up there, you wrestle with your soul. You don't fire at a foe, you flagellate yourself. You don't do your patriotic duty, you have a spiritual orgasm. Stavenden versus Stavenden all the time." Farson said, "Yes, fancy ramming that Dornier. Behaving like a road-hog, that's what it is. A road-hog."

These and a hundred other memories came to Boy as he automatically took in the horizon in a continuously searching gaze.

Secretly he had begun to enjoy himself. He liked his work,

he had settled down to it; in a way there was a certain routine about it! It was a highly-ordered affair, from the time-tables of the patrol, the formations of operational flights, the parcelling off into zones of territory, the interdependence of departments, the careful reconnaissance, the watch, the planning in the wing commander's office, the formality of tactics—these appealed to him. The life of a soldier is one of ordered hazard; there are a thousand tasks and duties to make hot action automatic, regularize and sterilize danger, fear. Boy was a hardened soldier.

This time he was in particularly high spirits. (*The Hayward Touch. Farson said it, not he.*)

*“Blow, blow thou winter wind,
Thou art not so unkind
As man's ingratitude . . .”*

he hummed as his aircraft struggled up to nearly forty thousand feet, clawing its way through the rare air.

Below him a layer of cloud was suffused with sunlight that transformed it into a bonfire of whitish vapour, swirling its veiled form, fretted with silvery points of flame. Below that the familiar cameo-neat chequer-board of pasture and hayfield, green and beaten gold, and the toy farms and grey lines that were roads and silver lines that were rivers. The earth was the palm of a hand, open and extended, kindly, crossed with life-lines.

*“Bring me my bow of bur-ning gold,
Bring me my chariot of fi-re. . . .”*

he sang.

In England's green and pleasant land the sky was filled with the noise of swarming men of war, for which its illimitable blue on this soft autumn day ill prepared you.

Boy at last saw the Nazi formations. They were flying very high north-east, a closely-packed V-formation of bombers and then, above, a squadron of fighters. He dodged into a cloud-bank, swung his stick left and began to skirt the enemy. He hopped from cloud to cloud, shut off his engine and heard the deep thunder as they passed unsuspectingly beneath and far to the right. He set his course immediately behind, tailing them. As they stole serenely across the sky, stabbing through the cloud-layers, he dropped into a slow glide, protected from view all the time by a series of clouds, guided by the sound of the enemy

engines. His altimeter pointed to thirty thousand feet, then to twenty-five, then twenty. This was the height. The Nazis flew at twenty-five thousand feet, Boy followed a mile beneath, ducking into cloud-layer after cloud-layer. His mouth was dry. He screwed up his eyes each time he slipped into the open and cast a wary glance up. The sun was dazzling.

The Hayward Touch. Farson had said it, not he.

A pulse beat in his temple. He made his preparations. They were few and very simple. He took out his spare goggles and stuffed them under his thighs, a thin piece of rubber tubing he slipped between his teeth, he plugged his ears with cotton-wool very tight. He peered anxiously ahead. He must not reveal his presence for one moment or it would be all over. Without the protecting clouds he could have done nothing. Carefully he judged height, speed and the position of the next long bank of clouds.

If he increased to three hundred and fifty and started nosing up gently at about ten degrees he could come out roughly two thousand feet below the bomber formation; if he could time this operation to synchronize with his break-through the cloud-bank a mile ahead he would be set for a long burst of five seconds continuous fire from his tracer and explosive shells. They would know nothing until the fire began. . . .

His teeth quivered on the rubber. In his ears came unheeded the voice of someone singing,

*"America, I love you,
You're like a sweetheart of mine . . ."*

very faintly through the cotton-wool.

How closely-knit was that bomber formation. Nine big juicy Heinkels, gliding serenely across the English sky. How often had he seen this laconic formation broken up and scattered like sheep before the intrusion of a wolf in the fold. But they continued to come, these formations, as nicely-woven as the five fingers in a clenched fist. The clenched fist! Germany prided itself on that clenched fist. Strength through order, strength through unity, strength through all-balkans. All right, he wanted to give that clenched fist a nice rap over the knuckles. *He had them altogether now.*

*"From ocean to ocean,
For you my devotion,
Touchin' each boun-d'ry line . . ."*

The manœuvre was like an uppercut in the boxing ring. Boy swung out of the clouds less than six hundred yards beneath and behind the bombers. He nosed up smartly, caught the centre bomber in his gun-sights and pressed the button. The smooth belly of the Heinkel was suddenly torn as though with the stroke of a surgeon's instrument. The explosive shells whined and flashed, the tracers gnawed like rat's teeth. Simultaneously Boy ducked involuntarily and flung his arm over his eyes.

The walls of Jericho under the spell of the horn of Gabriel, the disintegration of the atom, the infantile dreams of Jack-the-Giant-Killer imagery throbbed through Boy's mind as he unloosed this savage pent power. The centre bomber's explosives ignited the bombs of the flanking machines, and after that the whole nine disintegrated in sympathy in a continuous blasting roar. Fire seemed to scream in the sky, rising and wrestling with fire like game-cocks. Blood, oil, bits of bone and metal, moisture shocked from clouds a mile above and all the brass gongs in creation stormed; drops of boiling metal and a savage suction. Boy spat blood and a loosened tooth from his mouth. The shock was like a blow with a hammer at the back of the neck. He retained consciousness by a concentrated and premeditated effort, but his hands refused to obey him. His machine was diving out of control. He spat and coughed feebly. He felt as though he had fallen into an air-pocket that paralysed all his faculties; he could not breathe. Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . . six . . . four . . . thousand. He watched the altimeter as it counted him out in some strangely perverted manner. Counted him out *backwards*. For some reason he wanted to laugh. As a boy he had read somewhere of a swimmer in mid-Pacific who, caught on a wave, looked downwards on the deck of the ship (*downwards*).

He could not move. Two . . . one . . . He clenched his teeth on the rubber tubing and fought against this paralysis as a sleeper fights to wake from a nightmare. A rush of sweet air, oil run across his wind-screen and—no, it was across his goggles— Was it his goggles or his wind-screen? It was a nice problem, that. He could not see much either way, so how could he tell? Goggles? No, probably wind-screen. Funny about one's eye. It could embrace a mountain on a retina smaller than your finger-nail. *The stick!* If it were his goggles he could not see the stick. But he saw the stick. He saw his hands touch it, willed them to move it back, back, back . . .

His aircraft seemed to bound into life and jolted him back as it sprang away from the rushing earth. Good. He had made it.

Automatically he began to test the engine, the controls, settle his swinging compass-needle. His goggles, too, were smothered with oil, after all. He managed to get them off and slip on the spares.

He tuned in quickly. "Hallo, red one. Hello. Answer. Why don't you speak up?"

"Hallo, red four."

"Speak up, Neil. Listen. I got them. I got them all."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Eh? I can't hear you. Why don't you answer? I got them all. The Heinkels. All nine of them. *Speak up!*"

"What are you shouting for? Have you gone crackers? Give us your position. What's that about the Heinkels? Don't shout."

"What are you whispering for? Oh, Lord, I've still got that cotton-wool in my ears. Ha, ha. That's funny. Ha, ha. Just a moment. I hit the centre bomber in the rack and the others went off with it. They were—ha, ha—they were packed tight together, you understand, and they—ha, ha—damn funny, Neil—cotton-wool—ha, ha—and they all blew up. It was like breaking a chain-stitch. The whole fabric collapsed. First the flanking bombers blew up, which in turn fired off the others. I think I blasted the fighters out of the sky. My God, it was terrific. My God!"

"All right, Hayward. Grand work. It worked then?"

"God, did it."

"How far were you? I mean, what range did you take for fire?"

"About six hundred yards. I couldn't have done it without the clouds. They provided perfect camouflage till the right moment. My God!"

"Six hundred yards. You stuck your neck out, didn't you? I envy you your luck. How do you feel?"

"Fine. I'm smothered in oil."

"Mother's little sardine. How many fighters were there?"

"A squadron. I can't see one. They may have got slapped down or just blown right off their course for good and all. Right in the solar-plexus, Neil. My God!"

"All right, Boy. Return to base."

"Right. Good hunting and happy landing."

Boy returned to the base as fast as he could. He felt hot and cold in turn. He had to keep shaking his head to clear it from a fiendish buzzing.

As soon as his aircraft came down the intelligence officer ran up.

"What the hell are you doing? What about your undercarriage?"

"What about it?"

"What do you think it's for?"

"Excuse me!"

"I beg your pardon."

"I'm smothered in oil."

"You seem to have picked up a lot of junk on the way." He pulled out a bit of a Heinkel that was stuck in the wing.

"What's this?"

"Foreign matter."

"What the hell do you think you're up to forgetting to let down your undercarriage? Want to break your bloody neck? Next time you'll be sent back to bloody school. Have a smoke?"

"Thanks."

"Here," said the intelligence officer, and gave Boy a hand as he got out of the aircraft. "Are you all right?"

"You bet."

"You don't look it. What happened? What are you standing like that for?"

Boy was feeling the ground under his feet. He pressed on it gingerly. "It's real."

"You're nuts."

"It's real all right. My God," he said, and then a moment later, "My God."

Boy had had a wretched time getting there, standing in the train for nearly an hour, his feet slowly becoming lifeless, reading and re-reading the same depressingly cheerful advertisements for wine tonics; and when he had got out, the deserted country station, dirty brown and streaming with rain, looked like some lost outpost; not even the walk, that he had anticipated would revive his circulation, restored his good-humour. The road was murky and his shoes slushed in mud, the trees seemed bedraggled and gaunt, a telegraph wire hummed dismally overhead in the wind and his coat collar irritated his neck. How different the countryside looked on this dismal late October day, stripped of all its autumn flower and foliage; even the grass seemed

colourless. He was determined that as soon as they had lunch he would take her to town and give her a good time.

Suddenly all his irritation vanished at a thought that struck him. He might complain spending a few hours in this patch of wilderness that had not even the redeeming feature of impressive bleakness, that was merely drab, yet she had to spend all her time here and in complete loneliness. Boy was touched with affection and admiration and pity; he knew that she would never complain, and he was inspired with her marvellous patience and devotion.

He had not seen her for more than a week, and he looked forward eagerly to the sound of her voice, her cheerful clatter in the kitchen, her light step in the room, her feminine garments hanging beside his in the hall and in the wardrobe, her arms about him and her soft red lips moulding the long kiss of adoring love.

He opened the front door very quietly to surprise her. Softly he slipped off his wet coat and hung it up, then on tiptoe walked towards the kitchen door and peeped in. She was not there. He gently opened the parlour door. She was sitting curled up in the cane armchair opposite the fire, half asleep, and the hair fell over her eyes as her head rested on her arm.

"Frieda!" he said gently.

She started and woke, looked at him a whole second before becoming aware of him, and then jumped up with a cry that went straight to his heart.

She rushed into his arms, and her efforts to control her pleasure made him feel strangely sad and deeply moved.

They both spoke at once, then they laughed. She crushed her face in his chest saying, "You must not look at me! You must not look at me! Darling, I'm a sight!"

"You do look a bit off colour, honey," he said with cheerful rudeness, pinching her ear. "But never mind, this ethereal glow suits you, too." He bent down and kissed the marvellously soft skin between the shoulder and neck. "You don't know how I've longed to see you," he said with a soft passion.

"Have you really?"

"Have you missed me?" he said.

She made no answer.

"Speak up!"

She patted his hand. "You know I don't have to tell you," she said quietly.

They settled down before the fire and they chatted cheerfully

for a while about everyday matters. He told her how quiet it was at the station these days, and for a moment she was lost in thought. Then she said, with feeling, "Oh, darling, if it would only last. . . ."

He did not know whether she meant their affaire or the lull in the fighting for a moment. Apart from such quiet incidental remarks she never referred to her love and dependence on him.

At last she mentioned something that had been on her mind ever since their first greeting. "Darling, how long can you stay this time?"

He noticed that she never inquired about the length of his leave, only how long he could spare to be with her, and he always answered of his own accord, "I've got so much leave," thus emphasizing that he would spend it with her. And, in fact, apart from one or two brief visits home he now spent almost all the remaining part of his leave-periods with her.

"I've only got twenty-four hours this time. I have to be back at the base at nine to-morrow."

"Oh, darling, what a pity. I had hoped it would be the weekend."

He did not understand the underlying meaning in this reference, and went on cheerfully to say, "Still we can do a lot in the time. Look, darling, shall we run up to town after lunch? We'll see a *matinée*, do a tea dance and then have a little dinner somewhere."

"I'd love to. But——"

"No buts. You need cheering up. You look quite pale. And I can guess why. This must be terribly depressing for you. I noticed coming here how mopy everything looks. It gave me the creeps. And to think of you cooped up here all the time by yourself. It's a pity these big night raids make it so impracticable to stay in London, otherwise I would suggest we close this place down."

"Oh, I don't mind that. I don't much like London." Then she added quickly, "But of course I'd love to come along for a day with you to dance and see a play."

"That's fine. And then we can catch an earlyish train back here." He got up and knelt down beside her, saying, "Honey, for to-night, I've brought a big bottle of *Liebfraumilch*!"

"Oh, darling!" she said in agitation, "I . . ."

"What is it, darling?"

She broke into a little shy laugh. "I'm afraid I only need comforting to-night."

"Oh. . . ." A sense of acute annoyance came over him. He had been longing for the few hours of love-making that eased his whole body and mind, and he was by nature of a rather strongly sensual type. For a moment he projected his annoyance on her, but almost at once saw how unreasonable that was and made an effort to smile.

"I'm sorry, darling," she said. "It's awfully rotten luck. Your only leave period for a week. But life is rather hard on women."

He kissed her cheek. She clasped his head tightly. "You don't mind too much, do you?"

"No, of course not."

But he could not conceal his disappointment.

"I tell you what," she said brightly, "let's have the Liebfraumilch now and forget all about it, shall we?"

He smiled, thinking that the wine would only stimulate his desire all the more.

He tried to be cheerful over lunch, which was delicious, but somehow the depression that had been gathering force during the morning overcame him and he lapsed into long silences. He felt restless and counted the minutes till they could get away and see a bit of life up in town.

But here he was due for another disappointment. The train that he had inquired about was very late, owing to the raids. It was the first time he had experienced the acute irritation of waiting on a draughty station in a drizzling rainfall for over an hour. At first he swore cheerfully enough at the delay, but gradually he felt an unreasonable rage that his time should be wasted on such a brief leave.

"Darling, don't look so sad," she said, smiling. "The trains are so very punctual in Germany. . . . Let them be a little late here."

He was touched, as so often he had been touched, by her simple apt remark. She had such a gift of putting things in their right perspective. He forgot about the train for the time being. But really, it was devilishly late, and when it came it was crowded, there was room to stand only for a good part of the way, and it proceeded at a tortuous pace. Several times he wondered why on earth he wanted to drag up to town anyway.

They were, of course, too late for the *matinée*.

They stood at the Victoria Station Hotel entrance, wondering whether they should go in for some tea. He watched the depressed crowd hurrying in the rain. The only conversation was about the raids; the faces of people were taut, nervous; a bus driver snapped at a young man who was trying to get on a bus

before the passengers had alighted; tempers were strained to breaking-point; a brooding anxiety was in the air, and the craters, the demolished buildings, the roped off diversion routes transformed the old majestic city, with its deep romantic yet sophisticated air, with the spirit of a battle-field.

"Well!" he said shortly. "Is that why we came to town?"

"Please don't be upset. Let's go somewhere nice and dance. What about the Café de Paris? They run tea dances."

"All right, let's."

As soon as they got there he felt better. He was very sociable by nature, and a gay crowd made him feel good. The tea refreshed him and they began to dance. After the third dance he noticed that she seemed very listless and then, looking at her, noticed her pallor once more.

"Honey, are you all right?"

"Perfectly." She gave a wry smile. "Just a little on edge, that's all."

"Oh, what an ass I am. Dragging you out all this way. . . . I'm terribly selfish. Please forgive me. Wouldn't you rather go to some concert, somewhere restful?"

"But do you care for music?"

"Of course."

She sighed. "It would be wonderful, darling," she said with all her heart.

He forgot all his irritation in his solicitude for her. He quickly got her out and, stopping a taxi, went to buy a paper. When he returned with it he found the taxi had gone.

"Where the hell is that cab?"

She took his hand. "Boy, please don't take all this trouble. I'm quite all right, really. All these cabs and things run you into awful expense. We can walk to Wigmore Street in ten minutes. I'd like to."

"But it's raining."

"Do you mind it?"

"No, but I thought you——"

"I like to walk in the rain. Really. It's nice. I lift up my face and catch it in my mouth, see?" She laughed.

He shrugged his shoulders, feeling quite pleased, really. Their relationship had taken on this easy-going form, neither of them stood on ceremony any longer; he had got the cab merely out of form, secretly he thought it rather an extravagance. Her attitude to money pleased him, and the only extravagance she ever permitted herself was in some artistic trifle for the house-

hold, a cut-glass vase, a picture, a piece of tapestry, something modest and charming which he could never grudge her; this little home had to be her constant environment. Let her, by all means, satisfy these small whims.

When he bought their tickets and they entered the little discreetly lit hall he felt rather vexed, however. He had been exaggerating when he said he would be pleased to go to a concert. He had never cared for music very much. He liked certain rather spirited works of Wagner, but he found the classical composers, after a little while, rather tedious. He would grow restless as his attention began to wander; he could not concentrate very long on the music. It gave him the same mild satisfaction as he found in looking at the pattern and colour of a piece of tapestry: after a while the design seemed to grow meaningless, the early shock of pleasure waned and he grew bored. And then, he thought, to come all the way to town in order to hear a piece of music he could get by switching on the radio seemed rather foolish to him, particularly in view of the difficulties they had in getting to town, the shortness of his leave, the expense involved. . . .

There was hardly a soul in the audience. The recital was devoted to Bach, Schumann and Stravinsky, and the artist was an unknown Czech pianist.

However, as he sat down beside her and watched the tired look fade from her eyes, he felt a twinge of shame at his secret irritation. How quickly she got lost in the music; soon her eyes stared out with a childlike clarity and repose, the colour began to come back to her cheeks and her hand in his tightened in rapture at certain passages. Boy tried to listen with attention at first, but he never cared for Stravinsky, which he could not make head or tail of, and the Schumann was unsubstantial, too other-worldly, in spite of certain rather nice touches. But Bach. . . ! He frowned at the prospect of infinite tedium. The Czech with the unpronounceable name was a tall, gauche youngster, with a large mop of hair that flowed artistically in calculated disorder over his forehead. He had one or two mannerisms that Boy began to watch with increasing irritation. He would hunch his shoulders, shake his head in solemn awe at certain phrases, and pause unnecessarily to dwell on passages which to him seemed to have an inner meaning. Boy wished he would go and have a hair-cut.

The audience seemed to consist entirely of a handful of bored critics and a hundred or so indifferent acquaintances of the artist

who had been persuaded to attend in order to lend moral support.

There was nothing for it, though. Boy had to resign himself. The only thing that made it bearable was his knowledge that she was enjoying it all so much. He could not but be moved by the soft, passionate attention with which she listened, and when she pressed his hand hard and gave him a wonderful intimate smile at a rich chord or colourful phrase he felt in a measure compensated.

But Bach. . . ! That, to finish up. . . . This was too much of a good thing. The repetitive tedium of five-finger exercises, the rolling platitudes, the resolving and unravelling of tiresome mathematical propositions. . . . Boy felt he could cry out at this ecclesiastical bore! And when it was all over the Czech made the least flutter of applause an excuse for a series of encores.

Twice Boy rose to his feet to escape, but before he had gathered sufficient courage the Czech began yet another encore. Just as Boy was about to give up the inexhaustible artist decided to play the Moonlight Sonata in its entirety.

This work was very familiar to Boy and, when he had heard it previously, it seemed a very pleasant and mildly titivating piece. He thought it was tolerable enough if heard early in the concert, at this stage it seemed an imposition. He sat back, his eyes closed wearily, frowning unconsciously.

Yet after a few bars a strange thing happened. The hackneyed first movement with its over-familiar sweetish tenderness seemed to have a new power, a deep delicacy of emotion, a caressing melancholy, the impish second movement had a delightful irony and seemed a charming preliminary to the storm and trumpeting of the final movement. It was this last movement that awoke Boy to full consciousness of feeling. He no longer pretended to be attentive, he no longer felt the tedium and irritation of politeness strained to breaking-point, he was deeply moved. The power and passion of the music surged and overwhelmed him; he felt as though new senses had been awakened in him. The impetuous piling up of toppling climax on climax, the breath-taking power that was always under sensitive control, the deep resounding theme that wove and interwove with its grandiose background, produced a strange and violent conflict within him. He clenched his hands unconsciously, his nerves seemed to be strained to a vital pitch as when he felt the intoxication of battle, the rushing wind screaming in the wings, the sun broken in whitish fire on his air-screw. He did not know what had sud-

denly happened to him; he was breathless, excited as though with the wine of sweet cold air after battle.

The feeling passed quickly, and, as soon as they were out in the street once again, he began to forget it, yet it had left an impression that later often made him wonder whether there were latent feelings in him that offered a new enchanted field of delight in music. When he had lived longer at this intensity perhaps he would feel this exquisite pleasure in other music. The thought was half-hearted and not clearly formulated, but he had begun to understand himself a little better.

Now that it was over Boy hoped that she would forget about the concert and fall in with his plan to go to a dance, but he sensed immediately that she could not bear to listen to a jazz band now. They walked arm in arm and she turned to look at him gaily, smiling happily, her cheeks flushed, her eyes softly alight.

"Oh, darling, it was so lovely. It made me forget everything. Wasn't it wonderful? Oh, Boy dearest, I'll never forget it. It's our first concert, isn't it? It was so, so nice. I know I will dream about it to-night and for many other nights . . . and always, when I'm waiting and longing to see you again, I'll remember it. The little hall, so softly lit, and the quiet that lay so deeply behind the music! What a sweet audience, don't you think? Just a few people—all lovers of music—none of your coughing, milling crowds! It was enchanting!"

"Yes, honey."

"And the Schumann! Oh, darling, I'll never forget that. *Never*. Except when I think of the Bach!"

She stopped in the middle of the pavement, overcome with rapture. "Darling, that Bach was the loveliest music I ever heard! It seemed to resolve love in its component parts, just to show what it's made of, and then fuse it together again."

"Yes, darling. Where shall we go now?"

"Oh, let's go to some nice quiet restaurant and eat. I'm famished," she said, laughing.

They chose some quiet popular restaurant off Piccadilly which was the haunt of young people, and the waiter became very busy arranging their places near the window, putting flowers on their table, fussing with wine-lists, menu cards.

"What wine will you have, sir?"

"What shall we have, Frieda?"

"Oh, let's have a Hungarian wine, darling," she said, quite carried away. "What about Tokay?"

"Yes, if you like."

The waiter bowed as though in homage before the lady's behest.

Boy listened to her effusive chatter. She was prodigiously happy; she could not get the music out of her head and would hum it at intervals. He watched her with kindly tolerance.

"Look, darling. I'm sure that waiter thinks we're newly married or something," she said, laughing.

Boy turned and saw their waiter eyeing them with benevolent amusement and whisper something to a colleague, who laughed.

She turned to him. "It has been so nice, hasn't it? Just like a honeymoon." These simple words, uttered artlessly, suddenly made her blush and look down at her plate. She had watched him as she said the words and something in his look had stopped her short.

As a matter of fact they invoked a strange feeling in Boy. He felt a curious helplessness. What on earth was he expected to say to that? He knew she had meant nothing by it, but unconsciously she had implied a strong secret wish that shone clearly through the lightly uttered remark.

He said nothing for a moment, and then asked her if she liked the restaurant. It was a lame remark and he expected her to ignore it, but she seemed to have recovered immediately and answered him.

Within a short time she behaved as though nothing had happened.

They ate and drank heartily. Music exhausted her and gave her a fine appetite. Apart from a few enthusiastic comments on the concert she said little, and after a while they lapsed into a contented silence, enjoying the brightness and serenity of the restaurant. The few remarks were about the young crowd, most of the people in uniform. It was a gay crowd, and every now and then she would turn to him and they would exchange a smile.

Boy enjoyed the meal and agreed that her choice of wine was a good one.

There was nothing much to say. Boy knew her opinions on almost every subject of interest to them, they had explored each other's minds as thoroughly as any young couple of some months' intimate friendship, and he now felt a comfortable pleasure in her presence. As was natural, he no longer felt the tension of emotion with her as with someone new, excitingly full of personal mysteries. Her moods, her personal characteristics, her facial expressions, her tricks of speech, the quality of her voice,

all these he knew by heart. He was satisfied, accepted her as his most intimate friend and companion, took a quiet pleasure in her society, and such remarks as she had made were an inevitable corollary of their relationship. He knew that and therefore he was taken aback at the resistance he felt towards it.

They finished dinner and lit cigarettes. She leaned back, her eyes closed, and smiled at some inner feeling; there was something a shade melancholy in her smile.

"Tired, darling?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Happy?"

"Mm, yes."

"Do you want me to talk or be quiet?"

"Whatever you like best, darling."

He stretched his legs under the table and pressed her foot with his.

Her eyelids quivered a moment and, for a moment, he started as he saw, or thought he saw, a tear appear in her eye.

"What is it, darling?" he said with concern.

"Nothing, Boy," she said quietly.

He felt very upset suddenly.

"Frieda!"

She made no answer.

"Frieda dearest, are you unhappy?"

He wished she would say something. He wanted to tell her to open her eyes so that he could see whether she was crying. But he was afraid to ask her in case she was. He could not bear the thought of her in tears.

They sat thus for a few minutes, neither saying a word, both thinking the same thing, both feeling a deep impulse of sympathy and understanding in each other, in the vital issue before them.

At last he said flatly, "Darling, do tell me what it is?"

She shook her head and opened her eyes. He was relieved to see that she was not going to cry. Her eyes were a trifle moist, but that might easily have been due to the cigarette-smoke.

Suddenly she sat up and gave him a radiant smile. She leaned forward and patted his hand affectionately. "Darling, you haven't said very much about the concert. Did you really enjoy it?"

"Why, to tell you the truth," he said with disarming candour, "I liked very much the Beethoven Sonata, the Moonlight."

She pulled a face and looked at him quizzically. "Yes . . . it

is nice . . . only in Ger . . . Austria one knows it too well." She suddenly giggled.

"Why do you laugh?"

"I just thought of something. In Austria the Moonlight Sonata embodies all the heroic traits of the national character. It is really full of bombast, darling, and we joke about it. I only laughed because when I first came to England I used to stand up every time I heard 'Roll Out the Barrel', imagining it to be a sort of national anthem like the 'Horst Wessel'. You are not angry?" she said quickly.

"Lord, no. It's really funny," he said, grinning.

The thought of her standing up ceremoniously whenever the troops sang the beer barrel polka seemed deliciously absurd.

She sighed with relief. "Oh, dear, it is so nice when the English laugh at themselves. Then you really did not mind me saying that?"

"Of course not," he reassured her.

"But didn't you like the rest of the concert? The Schumann? Not even that? It is so romantic, I thought it would appeal to you."

"Frieda, my sweet, I loved to see you enjoying it so much. That was enough for me."

She shook her head. "It's a pity."

"But why? Does it matter so much if I don't like music?"

"It does. . . ." She frowned, trying to get her thoughts carefully formulated. "You see, I never used to care for music so much myself. Now, it has to compensate me for so many other things. . . ." She hesitated and then finally gave it up.

"Go on, darling."

"No, nothing. I'm a little on edge to-day. You mustn't take any notice of me."

"But you must tell me, Frieda. If it's about yourself I must know. It compensates you for the other things you miss. That is what you are trying to tell me, isn't it? You are very lonely there, aren't you?"

"I have you."

"Yes, of course. But there are whole weeks when we don't see one another. You must miss many things. Don't you know anyone down there?"

"No. Whom can I know? The nearest village is a mile away, and even so I don't belong there. They look upon Londoners as strangers, these good people, so how they must view me. . . ! But, really, I don't mind. I am really very lucky. But . . . I

wish you could learn to like music. I learned to. Because it is something we can do together. Reading books, decorating the house, sewing things—well, that is for one person alone. But to listen to music is to be sharing another's happiness . . . see the other smile, press his hand."

"Yes, I understand now. You know, Frieda, I found out something about myself. When I went to the concert I did not know that the Beethoven would have such an effect on me. Only six months ago it left me cold. Oh, I used to like it—as one likes a smart suit of clothes or a pretty design on a plate, but I was never moved by music. I think to-day has been a good start. One of these days I know I will be able to share your enthusiasm."

"Will you, darling! I am so glad. I do want you to!"

This seemed to Boy rather extraordinary. What difference did it make to another what one liked or did not like? But after he thought a little he realized what she meant. There was so little for them to do in the world which surrounded her that it was indeed necessary to find intellectual and emotional interest in things which the normal young man and woman rarely occupied themselves with. Himself he would never have gone to a concert, rarely even listened to the radio orchestral works; at home and amongst his set these things never featured in the round of events. But he understood that there were latent feelings in him, and once he undertook to discipline himself and try to understand it would be well worth while, particularly in view of their relationship.

On the other hand, what she said perturbed him slightly. Any sort of change always made him feel suspicious, and he had never before experienced a situation where he had to work actively in order to preserve love. He remembered her words 'make love', as an act of creation, something actively worked for. Well, he supposed these things could not be taken for granted, could not be taken lightly like picking an apple from a tree; one had to discipline oneself, make certain sacrifices . . . and the ends were so worth while that surely . . . He started at the strange expression that came over her face a moment.

"Frieda, what is it?" he said urgently.

"Oh, dear," she said with a short laugh, "I'm such a fool! I keep thinking the most absurd things."

"What things?"

"Oh, you'll laugh at me."

"What things?" he repeated.

"I know you'll think me silly, but it struck me what a strange thing our love is. It's like walking a tight-rope."

She burst into laughter, which she was quite unable to control for a moment.

"Like walking a tight-rope? I don't understand."

"Oh, it's just silly."

"Silly or not, it obviously worries you. Won't you tell me? Please, Frieda. I'll try hard to understand. You know how I want our love to be a success."

"A successful love. That sounds like a career, doesn't it? Like being a successful pilot or accountant or things like that."

"Well, I still want to know."

"You see, Boy, ours is such a narrow, such a delicate affaire, it is so finely poised . . . so many things must not be mentioned, things which are always mentioned by lovers . . . so that when a waiter behaves as though we're newly-weds we feel so uncomfortable. . . . There! I have said it! But I don't mean it! Really, I don't. It just serves as an illustration of what I mean. Marriage is right out of my range of vision. Truly, I've never considered it for ourselves. Please believe that, Boy, darling. But what hurt me was that it could not even be mentioned without us feeling pain . . . embarrassment. . . . Oh, darling, don't look upset. I told you it was all so silly, didn't I? And then, so many other things are never mentioned either. Your family, your friends, your world . . . you don't discuss them with me . . . you never chatter about the intimate affairs that make up your life, never ask my opinion, never tell me anything about what you feel, never ask my advice about your troubles at home, your personal problems . . . I don't share any of that . . . and these things are usually shared by lovers. . . . We only talk about abstract subjects, generalities . . . current affairs! or music, or books! Dear, dear! Can you picture our love . . . it is something so fairy-like, so elusive, so impersonal, so unworldly . . . that one fine morning I'll wake up and find I've just dreamed it all. To be able to appreciate Stravinsky! What a thing to build one's love upon! "

Boy said quietly, "Frieda darling, please believe this . . . I've found in no one such encouragement and help to the greatest problem I ever had to face than with you. . . . Don't you remember that night when I broke that bird's wings? "

She smiled and shrugged her shoulders. "Yes, I haven't forgotten that, Boy. But that was just a crisis, and life doesn't consist of crises. Life is bread and butter, a little hope, a fireside, a

friend to tea, a birthday celebration, the birth of a baby, rates and taxes and gossip over the garden wall. No, darling, there may be one or two crises in your life, but they will pass away like bad dreams, but rates and taxes and garden walls and babies being born are always with one."

She quickly took his hand. "But please don't take any notice of all this. I warned you I was not myself. I've had a bad pain all day, my nerves are on edge—the concert or the wine has gone to my head. Blame it on what you like. But please, please don't try to explain anything. Please!"

Explain! Explain what? That although he knew what she was, it was so difficult to make others understand. That often he had spent hours turning the problem over and over in his mind, lying awake in bed, wrestling with his fears, trying to spur himself to take that step, to introduce her to his people, his friends, to face everyone fearlessly, to give her a place by his side that he knew she deserved and could fulfil as well as any girl he would have the luck to meet. How could he explain all this? How could he confide his secret fears? Perhaps one day, soon, he could bring himself to do it, conquer his fear, overcome the prejudices of the foolish and ignorant, give her her little bit of living room. God, did anyone deserve it more! Yes, one day . . . one fine day, he would do it. He had already given so much, he could give that! Yes, he would! But not just yet . . . one had to make plans, prepare the way, test people . . . one could not change the world in a day. That was true, was it not? Explain. . . .

"Darling Frieda, I do understand. . . . Please, don't be upset about it. Leave it to me. One day this thing will be solved as so much else has been solved. I have stood by you so far, haven't I?"

She could not speak with the feelings invoked by these words.

"You do have faith in me, don't you?" he said.

She tried to say something and failed. Then at last she managed to say, "You have given me the only faith I have ever had."

It was a moment full of delicious ardour, when he felt he was capable of any sacrifice. He took her hand and clasped it. At that moment he sincerely believed he would one day give her her rightful place beside him.

At this moment the waiter came over to pour out fresh coffee and they began to talk of other things.

He saw that he had made her happy. They did not refer to the matter again.

At last they finished their coffee and decided to go for a walk in Hyde Park before catching their train. It was beginning to get dark as they entered the Park gates. He felt her hand press his, and they strolled happily, saying little.

There were few people about and it was so quiet that for the moment they could imagine themselves in the country once again. They began each sentence, "Do you remember . . ." and laughed and kissed under each tree they passed. On the whole, though, Boy felt it rather an effort to revive these sharp feelings of high summer. It was all very well, but the period of wooing was at an end. After all, he had known her in the deepest intimacy; this kissing game began to pall after a while. Besides, it made him feel a little irritated that the feelings evoked could not, this evening, be appeased.

"Shall we go now, dear?" he said at length.

To his relief she agreed. They reached the station only to find that their train was delayed, and went to one of the drab refreshment rooms which, owing to insufficient black-out arrangements, was dimly lit. Boy suspected the crockery, and a slight argument arose with one of the waitresses.

"Never mind, dear," she said when the girl had gone, "these poor girls are rushed off their feet."

"That's all very well, but they could at least wash out these beastly cups properly."

She looked at him anxiously.

"Don't be upset, darling. I'm terribly nervy to-day, and when that girl jolted my chair I felt like killing her. That's why I'd rather you didn't quarrel with anyone."

"I wasn't quarrelling, Frieda," he said, rather annoyed. "I was merely drawing her attention——"

He stopped as he saw the look in her face. There was no doubt about it, she was on edge, and he had sufficient understanding to keep his own irritation under control. They were both rather tired and, after a while, he saw her stifle a yawn.

"Tired, darling?"

"Yes, I am rather. Are you?"

"Yes. I wonder how our train is getting along. It's these rotten train journeys that make one feel like this, you know. I'll go along to the booking-office."

When he came back he was rather vague and quiet. She finally had to ask him about the train.

"Well, they don't seem to know properly. It's these raids. The official times have been changed now. The fellow says that

there's a train supposed to be in at ten-forty-seven. We won't get back till long after midnight, particularly at the rate they crawl along these days. Also, I find I'll have to be up at five o'clock to-morrow to get my five-forty train. The next one doesn't stop before Richmond; it's an express to London. So in order to catch the six-fifty-five train from Slough I'll have to catch the five-forty."

"Oh, darling, but that won't give you very much time to get a good night's sleep."

"Yes, it's rather a bore."

They said nothing more.

"Frieda."

"Yes."

"I find there's an eight-thirty-five train from London that would take me just in time to the base. It's an express. Would you mind very much if I saw you off here?"

She looked completely at a loss.

He thought she could not follow his deductions. "Remember, darling, that I won't be able to catch the seven-twenty train at the other end, but the five-forty. The later one doesn't stop before Richmond, you see. Which means I'll have to be up at about five. I won't want to wake you up then, will I?"

"But, darling, I'll get up to see you off."

"But why, Frieda dear? There's no reason for you to do that. And even so, as we won't be back before midnight, it means just getting to the cottage in time to go to bed. We'll hardly have a minute together, really, will we?"

She said nothing.

"I could easily put up in town. The Farsons will be quite pleased, I think. If not they, there are plenty more who would."

"Yes, I see."

"Do you mind very much?"

"Mind what, darling?"

"You know—me seeing you off here."

"You would rather do that?"

"No, of course not. But the other way won't give us any time together. I tried to explain by the time-table."

"Yes, I see."

There was a long silence. He looked at his watch. The train was due in at last.

As they got up and walked towards the platform he tried to read the expression on her face. She seemed to be simply tired. She hardly answered anything he said to her. It was almost

pitch dark on the platform; the glass roof blotted out the sky's pale glow; there was the gloomy rumble and echoing clatter of luggage trolleys, the shouts of porters, the fierce hiss of steam that rose in serpentine fumes from the black bellies of the locomotives, the grinding of iron on iron as the train drew in.

"Well, Frieda?"

"Well, what?"

"Would you mind if I didn't come with you?"

"No, dear," she said.

He put his arms round her in the darkness and held her so for a time. She did not make any active move to meet his embrace, merely acquiesced.

"Are you sure you don't mind?"

"No, I don't mind."

"You see, if I catch this——"

"I know, dear," she said quietly. "You've always been so very good at time-tables. Good-bye."

18

Boy was just settling down to write his letters when he was disturbed by a ring at the door. He did not answer until it was repeated, when he realized that the maid, too, had gone out.

"Oh, hallo," he said.

"I just wanted to drop in for a minute."

"Did you want Judith? Everybody's gone to church, I'm afraid. Left about ten minutes ago."

"I see."

"Shall I tell her you called?"

"Yes, do that." She was about to turn away when he noticed her hesitation. "How are you, Helen?"

"I'm well. Aren't you going to ask me in, Boy? Don't you number me amongst your friends?"

"I'm sorry. I must have been frightfully rude. Do come in. I warn you, I'm all alone. Even the maid has gone."

"I don't mind—if you don't."

"Are you any good at making tea? We'll have to fend for ourselves."

"What fun."

He helped her off with her coat. She smelt of the rain, and the wind that had flushed her cheeks made her look very fresh, full of vitality. She was dressed in a very pretty flowered-silk

frock and wore a nice string of cultured pearls, with which she played from time to time. She was dressed quite decorously and did not take off her gloves, even to shake hands. Her small velvet hat had a pin of sapphires and a tiny veil; this, too, she did not take off.

Boy unconsciously put on his best party manners. He apologized having to take her into the kitchen and dusted a chair with his handkerchief, which she mistook for an ironic gesture.

"The toaster has broken. We'll have to do the toast in front of the electric fire."

He cut the bread and got the tea-things together whilst she held up the slices of bread in front of the fire at the end of a fork.

"What have you been doing, Boy?"

"Nothing special."

"It's ages since we last saw each other. You remember—that time we met them at the Ace of Spades. You were with that friend of yours."

"Yes, I remember."

"Do you see her still?"

"Yes."

"I'm sure she's very nice."

"Thank you."

"I've just had lunch with the Verekers. Only an hour ago. I couldn't manage all that toast, Boy. My, the fire's hot; it's making my cheek burn."

"Don't you see Piers Stavenden any more?"

"My dear, of course not. That belongs to the remote past. You are out of touch, aren't you?"

"I suppose I am."

"It's a pity we never see you these days. You have genius for making parties go. We missed you at Wilber's party the other day. Reggie mentioned it."

"You see him now, do you?"

"Well, you know, he's been very persistent all the time."

"Yes."

"Are you going to the dance at the Farsons' place?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I'm busy."

"You were invited, weren't you?"

"Well, not this time."

"Oh, my dear, how very strange. I'm sure Bill wanted you to come. I suppose he knew you wouldn't."

"I suppose so."

"Why don't you try? We have so much fun—particularly now that all those Christmas parties are fitted in weeks before the holiday to coincide with people's leaves. It's wizard. Before we had just a few parties over Christmas and New Year, now there are dozens weeks before and weeks after."

"I suppose you enjoy them all."

"All of them. I love parties. People are so much more interesting now that they have so many exciting stories to tell. Do you know Bruce Devonport? He was with the *Warspite* when she sailed into Narvik Bay."

"Yes, that must have been damned exciting."

"And I met Stuart Leveson at the Graystons. You know, the war correspondent. When he couldn't get out of France he had to remain under cover for nearly six weeks, and escaped in a speed boat off Boulogne."

"I wonder if he really did."

"Oh, it's true. It was in the papers."

Boy laughed.

"Still, I'd like to have heard him tell the story. I remember Stew from school. Do you see him still? "

"I will to-morrow evening at the dance."

"Give him my love."

"Of course. But why not come? I'm sure Bill will be only too pleased. Everybody will be there. *Everybody*."

"I couldn't this time."

"I suppose you're seeing your friend? "

"Yes."

She hesitated. "Boy, who is she? Why don't you ever bring her along to meet us? "

"She's rather shy," said Boy slowly.

"How silly. I'm sure it isn't that."

Boy flushed.

"Why are you sure? Don't you believe me? "

"No."

"Why not? "

"Because I don't," said Helen. "You are silly, Boy. Who is the girl? What did Bill Farson mean when he asked Murray if she was the one? "

"Is that what he asked? "

"Yes," she said. "What did he mean? My, I'm quite roasted on this side and ice-cold on the other. Feel my cheek."

He touched it with the back of his hand. "Yes. You've

made enough toast, Helen. I hardly want any."

"Is she someone who—I mean, she's not a snob, is she?"

"No, of course not."

"Then is she someone who—you don't want us to meet?"

"What on earth do you mean? What did Neil Murray say?"

"When?"

"Stop hedging, Helen. You know jolly well what I mean. You all talked about her after we left, didn't you? I hate people who talk behind one's back. I suppose Bill Farson asked Murray if—— What exactly did they say?"

"There's no need to get annoyed."

"I hate people who talk behind one's back. Tell me what they said."

"Please don't shout at me."

"I can't help feeling annoyed. I hate people to do that. It's a sneak's trick. What did they say about her?"

"I won't tell you if you shout like this."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Helen, tell me!"

"Good heavens, what in the world's the matter?"

He pulled himself together. He realized that he would give everything away if he went on like this. Murray had said nothing. Nor Bill. They wouldn't. His fears were stupid. Helen was simply voicing a natural feminine curiosity and drawing him out by a clever manœuvre. If he hadn't been blinded by his shameful fear he would have seen at once how skilfully she had made him give himself away.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper."

"I should think so." She smiled. "Then she is someone you don't want us to meet."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, Boy Hayward," she said, and didn't bat an eyelid, "you admitted so yourself." She turned her eyes open wide in innocent astonishment and looked right into his.

"You little liar," said Boy calmly, "I admitted nothing of the sort."

She was not put out. She lowered her eyes for a second and then evaded the accusation smoothly. "I don't mean you admitted it in so many words. But you admitted it in another way just the same."

"I did nothing of the sort," said Boy hotly.

"Oh, don't be silly, Boy Hayward," she said warmly. "Of course you did. Why didn't you introduce us to her? Why don't you ever bring her to meet your friends? Don't tell me you don't

want to bring her to parties and meet your people. I know you. You're not a hermit or anything. You're a nice normal boy and you like to be with your friends and have good times together. And besides, you're changed," she pressed on mercilessly, "you're bad-tempered, and if there's one thing you were famous for it was your good temper. Judith told me how you've been lately——"

"Damn Judith," said Boy, "and damn you, too. I hate gossipers."

She burst into tears.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, don't cry. I'm sorry I'm so rude. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"It's not that," she said, lowering her head so that he could not see her face. "It's not that at all. I wouldn't cry because you told me off, Boy."

"What is it then?"

"I—I feel sorry that you should be—so—changed—unhappy. I mean—you look unhappy. Really you do."

"You've got a cheek," said Boy angrily. "I'm not the least bit unhappy. You're making it all up. You want to draw me out. Good Lord, I never dreamed that such an innocent-looking girl like you could be so damned Machiavellian. Why, you're not eighteen yet!"

She blushed. "You're very rude."

She picked up a cup and then, realizing that it did not belong to her, put it down again and tried to calm herself by lighting a cigarette.

"You haven't told me who she is, have you?" she said calmly. "You fly up in the air every time I ask. Why?"

"What business is it of yours?"

"None," she said, trembling. "I thought I was a friend of yours. That's all. After all, you asked me about Reggie Vereker, didn't you?"

"Oh, hell, why do you persist? There's nothing to tell. Absolutely nothing."

"Yes, there is. Of course there is. You wouldn't be so touchy."

"All right, then, there is. Think what you like!" he said, in a flaming temper.

"Why won't you tell me?"

"Look here, Helen, I told you I hate gossipers. I don't care to be discussed by anyone. I don't want to discuss my friend with anyone. Is that clear?"

"Is it? I suppose you don't discuss me with your friends? What about Jo Blake? He told me what you wrote about me. Very amusing! But I didn't mind. There was nothing malicious about it. One has a right to discuss one's friends. Why not? Boy, you mustn't be so silly about this girl-friend of yours. I don't want to know anything about her if you don't want to tell me, only I did think as I'm a friend of yours you——"

"I don't want to discuss her with anyone. I hope that that is clear to you."

"Well, then," she said, "I'll have to think what I like about it, won't I?"

"Precisely. And let me tell you something! You're a very inquisitive and feather-minded, stupid, spoiled brat, and you could do with your bottom well spanked!"

She went quite pale. "How dare you," she said weakly.

Boy was taken aback. He had totally forgotten himself. How could he have spoken to her in this way? He saw by her expression that she was shocked. Even in the midst of his anger he was impressed by her extreme innocence. It pulled him up.

"I'm terribly sorry I said that, Helen," he muttered. "Please forgive me."

"I—I can't. Oh, how could you have said that horrid thing to me," she said, upset. "How could you?" she said to herself. "It's so coarse. Boy, I'm very angry with you. How could you? Oh, how could you?"

He looked at her with abashed tenderness. The way she had changed made him want to take her in his arms and soothe her. She was pink up to her pretty ears. She could not meet his eye and was trembling as she stood repeating over and over again, "How could you, Boy?" There was more distress than anger in her manner.

"I'm so sorry. You must try to forgive my army language," he said.

"You were horrid—coarse—I never knew how horrid you are. No, no, don't touch me. I'll never, *never* allow you to touch me."

"Oh, please, Helen, if you only knew how sorry I am I offended you."

"Don't touch me! Oh, how could you have said that to me? You made me feel horrid!"

He tried to take her by the shoulders, but she pushed him away furiously and then smacked his face.

He cried out sharply, "Oh, blast!" He pulled himself up in time.

"Oh, Boy, that cigarette burned you! Is that it?"

"It's nothing."

"Did it really burn you?"

"It's all right now."

She looked wide-eyed at the red mark left on his wrist. "Does it hurt?" She took his hand instinctively. "I'll put some butter on it, dear. I'm sorry. Really very sorry. It was an accident."

She dabbed some butter on it, kissed his hand involuntarily, then coming to her senses, pushed it gently away.

"You do like me, don't you?" he said.

"Yes, I do."

She still could not meet his eye. When he put his hands on her shoulders she started nervously. Curiously, he was not really sorry he had shocked her. It gave him a peculiar and subtle pleasure. He took her chin and, lifting the silly little veil from her eyes, kissed them and then her lips, still cool from the wind.

Suddenly they were friends. Her eyes were alight after the kiss.

"You do like me?" she said. "You meant that, didn't you?"

"Of course. But—what would Reggie Vereker say if he knew?"

"What would the mysterious friend of yours say?"

"I asked you first."

"Yes . . . well, my family like Reggie and they encourage him . . . but I don't know if I like him very much."

Boy did not wish to probe in a delicate matter. He knew the circumstances that threw Helen in Vereker's way. The Favershams were not well off, the last head of the household had inherited an old-fashioned business that had not managed to survive the war. The Favershams were accustomed to live well and were, in these desperate and merciless times, in danger of losing all of their comfortable security. Very tactfully, almost unobtrusively, Helen had been persuaded to save the family fortunes by accepting the suit of this wealthy young man who had a reserved occupation. It made Boy's blood boil. He knew that so far she had carried out her parents' wishes merely to the extent of politeness.

"You don't like him much, dear?"

"Oh, I like him quite. He's rather amusin'."

She said 'amusin'' with that childlike air of attempted sophistication that always endeared her to Boy. Helen adopted these

'sophisticated' phrases and poses in cycles. For a week or a fortnight life was 'devastating' or 'shattering'. Suddenly it ceased to be 'shattering' and became 'amusin' for a week, after which everything was 'wizard'.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"He's very kind and rather sweet, and then—he's always on the spot. I'm afraid I treat him badly. He was very jealous of Piers when he gave me his wings, but I made him behave properly. I can do what I like with Reggie and that's rather comforting." She ruffled his hair. "Why I like you, Boy, I don't really know. You're not as amusin' as Reggie and you haven't got his wit. And you certainly haven't looks."

Boy stood nearly six feet in his socks, had a handsome chin, well-cut lips, fair hair and a nose of Roman character. He had always taken his good looks so much for granted that it gave him an air of confidence in any circle. Therefore he was considerably taken aback at her appraisal.

"I haven't any looks?" he asked, unable to contain his surprise.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," she said, superbly brushing the matter aside. "You're not meant for decorative purposes. I like you." Then she pulled a face, avoided his effort to kiss her again—the first had awakened desire for further caresses, was full of promise of a warm, delightful affection.

"No, no, dear. Not now. What if they come in? Now you sit down and I'll pour out the tea."

As she gave him his cup she said, "It would be so nice if we could go to that dance to-morrow, Boy. You know you'd like it. Everybody will be there. We're not planning anything. Just stringing along together from place to place. Fox-trots with Jimmy Feather, and then waltzes with Emilio and tangos with the Gipsy band at Souvarin's. Just auld lang syne. There'll only be old friends. Won't you come? It would be so nice. There!" she said, "this is the first time I ever asked anyone to come out with me!"

"I'd love to. Really, I would. Only I promised . . ."

She turned away. "Don't you want to tell me about her, Boy?"

"Helen dear, you've been honest with me. I know I owe it to you." He got up and took her hand. "I know I ought to tell you. . . ." He looked into her wide-open eyes. Tell her? What could he say which she would understand?

"Well, will you?" she said. "Who is this mysterious woman

who monopolizes you? I'm dying to know. And it isn't curiosity, Boy. It's because I'm—fond of you."

"I know."

"Please tell me."

He swallowed and then said with an effort, "All right, Helen."

"You will? Oh, good! Go on."

"Well," said Boy, "this girl is a Hungarian ex-countess whose husband sent her out for safety when the German influence spread to that unfortunate country. I knew her husband at the University. He was a crack—polo player, an expert shot and wrote verse about the folklore of his country. He made a vow of friendship with me so that whatever happened we should always be comrades. His wife cannot return to him till the war is over and I have pledged my honour to look after her and protect her in a foreign country." He went on, gathering strength and boldness from her expression of round-eyed wonder. "She cares nothing for society and feels she cannot enter into any convivial mood until she knows how fate has dealt with her beloved husband. But before I go on you must swear to keep all this a close secret!"

"I swear!"

19

As he entered the little hallway she ran into his arms with such a cry of fervour that he was taken aback.

"Frieda, what's the matter?"

"Oh, why didn't you let me know you would be late? I was frightened."

"Silly, what were you afraid of?"

"How can you ask me such a question!"

She was in tears.

"But, darling, what on earth's the matter? You must expect me to be late once or twice. Anything might happen—a train delay, special duties, anything!"

"Oh, darling, I've been so miserable the last two hours. I went to see if the train had come and it had. What was I to think? Darling, never, never be late. You have no idea what dreadful things occur to me. I begin to think you have been hurt or even killed in some air fight. I picture you in a hospital. And I wait, wait. . . . How am I to know? How will I ever find out? Where can I reach you? I wait. . . . Oh, darling!"

He patted her shoulder and kissed her. Then he took out his handkerchief and wiped her eyes.

If he were hurt, how would she know? Who would tell her? Where could she reach him? This cry struck home.

All the forgetfulness and childish delight in his anticipation at meeting her seemed so naïve. They were not living in some isolated nook, the world would not automatically disappear as soon as he entered the magic door, this was no secret retreat or refuge, it was part and parcel of the outside world. His mistake had been to pretend it had nothing to do with it, that they were living in some enchanted circle to which he had the key and where she remained delightfully hidden; her world being somewhere he could escape whenever he wanted to indulge certain appetites and forget something of the bitterness and hardship of his service life. But what, in heaven's name, was it from her point of view? How long could she remain hidden, an unwilling prisoner, because having abandoned her former way of life and relying entirely on him it was he alone who could give her the keys to his world. Yet this had been the first complaint she had made, and that, under such severe provocation, and couched in such an indirect appeal that once again he could not but be strongly touched and disturbed.

"Well, darling, it was something rather sudden that cropped up at the station. I couldn't phone you. You must not worry about me in future. Neil will always get in touch with you if there's something important"

"Oh, I'm so relieved you're here, darling. Have you had lunch?"

He knew the bother to which she would go to prepare these meals and he had not the heart to tell her that he had eaten well already at the Favershams.

"Just a sandwich, you know."

"Well, everything's ready if you want something."

"Have you eaten?" He knew without asking that she had inevitably waited lunch for him.

"Well, no. I didn't want any whilst I was waiting."

"Well, honey, let's set to!" He lifted her in his arms vigorously, kissed her heartily and made a show of enthusiasm at sight of the roast chicken. He had left the others with that feeling that he would never look at food again, but his conscience made him over-emphasize his willingness to eat, and he was placed in an absurd position in which he was in no mood to see the humorous side.

The excellent lunch was an imposition and, having committed

himself, he could not without hurting her feelings leave much on the plate.

"Darling, I have some nice apfel strudel, the way we make it in Vienna."

She looked at him with such hopeful pleasure that he returned her smile bravely. This, with a huge portion of cream that she had spent hours in churning, was presented with solemn satisfaction. He had consciously to swallow each mouthful.

"What is it, darling? Don't you like it?"

"It's lovely. Only I find it a little warm here."

She opened the windows wide.

After lunch everything seemed blurred and he felt a trifle ill. He cursed himself heartily and felt that he had deserved what he had got richly. He went to sit by the fireside in the armchair. His slippers lay underneath and his cigarettes on the occasional table beside him.

"What have you been doing?" she asked. Since their last evening in town he had been in the habit of discussing events as they happened at home or amongst his friends, and she knew of most of them. It was pleasant to sit here and gossip, but every now and then he stopped as he saw that she was trying to live through his experiences herself, pretending to herself that she was in their circle, participating in the social life, the warm intimate atmosphere which she rather idealized from afar. For this reason it was always rather difficult for him to discuss these things quite naturally.

He could not help comparing her with the girls he knew, particularly with Helen Faversham. One or two rather curious similarities struck him. Both girls had the same air of pride; with Helen it was in her naturally imperious and high-handed manner, with Frieda he could see it clearly in her passionate reserve whenever hurt or humiliated, the fierce resentment she would show at pity. Physically they were not dissimilar, and he could not make up his mind between them as to their charm for him. And there were other traits that struck him. Both girls had good taste; this was clear in the clothes they wore, the way they furnished their homes. Boy liked a girl to be smart and have an eye for pretty things. And in many other ways they were comparable, their zest for life, their romanticism, their essentially normal outlook. With Frieda it had been strikingly shown in the rapidity of her complete recovery from the shocks she had sustained. This latter made Boy wonder what Helen would do in similar circumstances, and he had to admit to him-

self that she would probably have taken the same step.

"Why do you look at me like that?" she said suddenly.

"I was just thinking how nice you look, darling."

"Go on!" she said with derision, but she was very pleased, of course.

"How long have we known each other? . . . Nearly five months now, isn't it? And I still love you as much as ever."

"Do you really, darling?"

"Yes, I do," he said. And then again, "Yes."

"Darling, I have been wondering about it . . . whether you loved me still, you know. . . ."

"You must know I do."

"I suppose so . . . but it's not the same sort of love, is it? . . . I mean, it's not the original . . ." She tried to make a gesture to illustrate an embracing passion.

"No, thank God," he said, grinning. "If we always loved like that the business of living would have to stop. But on the whole, the other sort of love is the real test, isn't it? After the first raptures have worn off, if we still feel a deep friendship, a strong attraction that does not change basically but becomes rather richer as we gain more experience, then we can say we have really made our love last."

With this she agreed heartily. She sat with her head resting on his knees whilst he glanced through some bills and other matters to do with the household.

"Oh, darling!" he said suddenly. She started guiltily.

"What is it?"

"What is this thing for seven guineas? A glass vase or something."

She got up and drew a deep breath. "I hoped," she said, "that you would notice it of your own accord. It's that lovely blue thing on the mantelpiece. Don't you see how lovely it is? That soft blue is as delicate as the sky, and it's beautifully made. Look, darling, it's so curved it doesn't seem to have an outline, it's perfect as a drop of water in symmetry. Don't you feel that? But"—here she stopped him as he was about to speak—"above all, it absolutely matches those figurines and the clock and the water-colours and the curtains. I was not sure when I saw it in the shop, but I felt my heart beat at that lovely soft blue. . . . Would it? Would it? Oh, darling, I simply couldn't resist it. I bought it and scampered home as fast as I could. When I put it on the mantelpiece I closed my eyes I was so afraid to look. But look for yourself!"

"Frieda!"

"Yes, darling?"

"Come and sit here a moment."

She sat down, immediately quiet.

"What is it, Boy? Have I done something wrong?"

"No, dear, you have done nothing wrong, only I want to explain something to you. You see, a vase is—well, it is something rather unimportant in a household. Pillows, sheets, winter clothes . . . these things are necessary and the very best are often an economy. Only don't you think a vase for, say, ten and six, would have been rather more in keeping with the way we live? Surely you could have got something quite charming——" He stopped. "Oh, Lord, what on earth's the matter now? I told you I'm not blaming you for anything. I just want to tell you my point of view."

"I'm sorry," she said flatly, "I promise it will never happen again. Never!" she said with such passion that he was dumb-founded.

He decided to ignore this strange outburst with quiet dignity. Her attitude was wholly unreasonable, as she would probably recognize herself in a calmer moment. He went on examining the household budget accounts.

"Frieda," he said. "This letter you wrote to the furniture company about the piano. . . ."

"Yes?"

"Well, you say, 'I'm sorry I can't view the piano after all, as I find I cannot really afford one at the moment.'"

"Yes."

"Doesn't it seem a little unnecessary to mention we can't afford it? I should have thought that if we merely said we're not interested at present, or something of that sort."

He could not understand the short laugh she gave.

"But why evade like this?" she said. "If I said I'm not interested they'd only bother me with letters and calls and try to persuade me that I must be interested, that no household is complete without a piano, that music is the food of the spirit, and other things with which I'll certainly agree, and then perhaps I'll find myself committed to buying a piano I can't afford."

"Not necessarily, if you remain firm. Polite but firm."

She made a gesture of irritation. "But what on earth does it matter if I tell them the truth? Do you really mind them knowing we can't afford a piano at present? I suppose you do."

This, of course, annoyed him.

"I should have thought you might understand my point of view."

"I think I do," she said shortly.

"Frieda, dear, is anything the matter?"

"Nothing."

"You sound upset."

"No. . . . Only why must you always try to evade in that way? Why not just tell these people the truth? Do you think they care two hoots if we can afford a piano or not?"

He looked away uncomfortably. She was in a strange mood and he decided to wait until she was in a better humour before offering the appropriate explanations. It seemed absurd to him that she should take this attitude.

Before he had finished looking through the remaining figures she had knelt down beside him and, leaning her elbows on his lap, whispered, "Boy darling . . . I'm sorry I'm behaving so badly. . . . I'm really very, very grateful for everything . . . I don't need to tell you that, do I?"

"No, of course not, darling."

"You've been the soul of generosity. . . . I know you've spent everything you possibly could. . . ."

"I've tried to make it pleasant here for us."

"Please forgive me for saying that."

"Oh, I've forgotten about it, really."

She laid her cheek against his knee and he ruffled her hair and kissed her head. Afterwards they shared the armchair and were content for a time. But in spite of these pleasant moments he had a strange uneasy feeling that things were not going right any more, and with all the delicacy of her kisses, the heartfelt tenderness of his caresses, this feeling persisted.

"Shall we have tea?" she suggested at length.

"Not for me, if you don't mind. I'm still nursing that plenteous lunch."

"All right, then."

"What shall we do?" he said, and looked out of the window. "It's still raining." He got up and went to the window, standing there a little time, then returned to the fireside. "Shall we have a game of two-handed bridge?"

"If you like."

He got a pack of cards and dealt. He was a very good player, very quick, and remembered every card that was played. He liked to play with a keen opponent. She tried hard to learn the game, but he was too good for her, and his explanations of what

she ought to have played made her feel nervous and lose the little grasp of the game she had. After about half an hour he did not bother to deal another hand.

"What's the time?" he said. He saw that it was only half-past five. Where they were it was difficult to get to any place in time to see a decent show or dance. They had given up the interminable train journeys to London. In town people were just getting ready to go along for a cocktail before beginning the evening. Here there was nothing except a dreary little barn of a cinema showing out-of-date films with a cracked sound track. He got up and went to the window again.

"Still wet out. I suppose it would be silly to go for a walk, with mud splashing up to your ankles."

"Yes," she said.

He went to have a look at the *Radio Times*, and then opened the radiogram. As he tuned in to some tea-time dance music he noticed a new record that lay on the pile. He turned it over. It was a Schumann recording of the 'Carnaval'. As he was about to replace it he saw another beneath that of the Bach-Gounod 'Ave Maria'. This also was a new acquisition. With a slightly sinking feeling he looked through the remaining pile and discovered that there were eight in all, all recently bought. This, he thought, was a bit too much of a good thing. Surely she could have bought one at a time. The B.B.C. for ten shillings annually provided a whole variety of concerts by the finest artists. Surely he had a real grievance this time. The records were six shillings each.. Still, he decided to say nothing about it. He hoped that by the way he examined the records she would understand what he meant.

They sat opposite each other in their armchairs and listened to the dance numbers on the radio. After a while he began to think that it really did not matter after all. Why not let her have this little pleasure? What were a few pounds here or there? She never spent money on shows or expensive recreations. It was mean to deny her this small expenditure. He decided to forget and forgive. He would not mention the records at all.

"Boy. . . ."

"Yes, dear?"

"I wonder . . ."

"Well, what do you wonder?"

"I wonder what you really think of me . . . compared with the other girls you know."

"I've only got one girl," he said.

"I don't mean in that way . . . I mean, the girls that—that move in your set—friends of your sister. . . ."

"They're not a patch on you."

"Really? But you don't mean that," she said impatiently. "Tell me the truth. . . . I do want to know as I've never met them. You see, I do want to find out if they are really like me . . . if I'm the type of person you would have met in the ordinary way."

"There's nothing ordinary about you, honey," he said gallantly.

"Oh, darling, I'm serious. What are they like—these girls?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I think you'd do very nicely with them; you'd like each other. Of course, none of them have your looks." He gave it up. The subject seemed a pointless one to him. What on earth did she expect him to say? It was tiresome the way women always wanted to be reassured about love, attacking it from a different angle each time, trying formula after formula, making a test case of every word uttered, every action; he felt irritated.

"Boy dear, who is this Helen Faversham you mentioned?"

There it was! He had felt it coming; give a girl an inch . . .

"She's a nice smart girl, good-looking, jolly . . . that's about all really."

"Is she witty?"

"In a way. Quite amusing."

"Gay and very popular, I should think."

"Well, she is popular," he admitted.

They said nothing more.

He tried to read her expression, but was relieved that she had seemed to forget the subject. But no:

"Is she young and a v——" She blushed.

"You silly ass," he said, grinning, "so that's it. I don't know and I don't care. The only thing I know of her private life is that she seems to be contemplating getting married to Reggie Vereker, who's well off. Nobody much likes him, he's a plump little toad and a snob. He's got a nice soft job in his old man's factory and has got off service on grounds of some managerial position, although he never goes to the office more than two days a week. It's an awful pity about Helen, I think."

"Yes," she said, and her manner changed. She seemed thoughtful for a moment. "But why does she want to marry him?"

"Money, of course."

"Oh, darling, how rotten! I'm so sorry for her, but she's a very silly girl to think of it even . . . if there's just the slightest chance of another way out. To marry a man for money. . . . It's simply dreadful. I could never do it!"

This last remark staggered him. He stared at her in helpless amazement. Was she serious? Had she forgotten everything? But no, she seemed perfectly calm, her manner was sincere, earnest. Then she looked up and saw his expression before he could change it.

"Oh, I see you don't believe it. But it is quite true. I could never do it."

"But—I don't understand that," said Boy, his intense curiosity overriding his discretion.

"No, I don't suppose you can understand. You see it's far worse than the other thing. It means—well, being with someone you don't like always, never to be free—and then one has to pretend all the time. The other is just a temporary matter, quickly over, and one is spared all the pretence. Then the important thing, too, is to have children. How can a girl give so much of herself to someone she doesn't like . . . no, no, it's far worse than——" She stopped. She was stammering and blushing.

He looked at her incredulously. He shook his head.

"Don't you see that?"

"Well, it takes a lot of swallowing, Frieda. After all, so many marriages——"

"Well, what of that? Because it is all registered and made respectable by the approval of the State doesn't make you like the person any the more, does it?"

"I see that, only——" He shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't you agree?" she persisted. She was strangely agitated. It seemed important to her that he should agree.

"I see what you mean, Frieda," he said tactfully. He wished now that she would drop the subject.

She lowered her eyes and said quietly, "I see you don't agree."

There was an awkward silence. It was the first time they had ever discussed the subject and they found it rather disturbing. Although he could understand and in part sympathize with what she said, it seemed incredible to him that there could be any real comparison between a marriage of convenience and prostitution. He saw, however, that she was very disappointed that he had failed to agree with her. He rose quickly and went over to her armchair.

"Frieda dear," he whispered to her bent head.

He touched her shoulder and was about to kiss her cheek when she looked up and made such a gesture of aversion that he drew back, hurt.

"Oh, please, don't. . . ."

"Oh, darling, you're upset again. Give me a kiss."

She averted her face.

"Won't you?" he whispered, exerting all his charm.

"Please, Boy—no!"

"But why not?" he coaxed.

"Oh, darling," she said in exasperation, "why do you always think things can be made right by a nice word and a kiss? Why do you always slide out of things that way? You make me feel soft when I know I must be hard. I don't want to be soft. . . ."

He felt very embarrassed a moment, then he said quietly, "Darling, does it matter to you so much? Will it help a little to know that I have never in my mind or heart ever attached any blame to you for what you were forced to do?"

She looked up quickly, drew a deep breath and shook her head. "Well, perhaps you do really mean it."

"How can I convince you?"

She got up, saying, "Don't you know how, Boy?" She went upstairs.

He was so overcome suddenly by this appeal that for a moment he did not know what to do. He paced up and down agitatedly. Yes, he knew how he could convince her. She was right. It was the only way. He could not divide his life into two air-tight and independent parts. The whole root of their problem must be attacked radically. But could he really bring himself to do it? The difficulties were so incredible. . . . And yet once again he was so moved by her appeal, the very tactfulness which she had shown enhanced its pathos. She would never ask him directly, never complain. . . . He tried to picture her life, its solitude—more, its desolation. She was so cut off that were he to get hurt or die she would never know about it. Patience and self-sacrifice, silence and loneliness were her only companions. . . . Her utter dependence on him . . .

He ran upstairs to her room. She was sitting by the window, her hands on her lap, quite still. She was so still that she might have been ill or asleep, only her eyes were open. Her hands lay utterly impotent on her lap, she leaned back listlessly. The window was wide open and a flurry of rain was beating within the room.

He took out his cigarette-case and offered it to her. She shook her head.

"Do you mind if I smoke in your room?"

"No."

He inhaled once or twice. It was so difficult to say anything.

Suddenly he threw his cigarette out of the window and knelt down beside her, gently picking her hands from her lap and placing them between his.

He examined them with tender humour. "Darling, your hands are so like you, aren't they? They seem to express everything you feel, that you are. Sensitive, soft, so delicate and cool and . . . unpractical . . . able to sew trifles, satins, lace covers, make cakes, play tennis . . . and be like magic in touch, in caresses. . . . Look how white and frail they are, how they tremble nervously. You can't hide anything with your hands. You can appear to be calm, but your hands always betray you." He kissed them tenderly, feeling them flutter against his lips. He closed his eyes, feeling the pulse beat as though for release against his cheek. She tried gently to pull them away, then, under his fiery kisses, they crumpled up helplessly.

"Darling," he said, without looking at her, "I promise I'll try. . . . I know what you want me to do. . . . I give you my word I'll try. . . ."

She kissed his head and said slowly, "Look, darling, the rain is coming in. Your head is all wet. Shut the window, please."

It had, indeed, fallen on his head and was streaming down his cheek. As he got up to shut the window he noticed that she shivered.

"Let's sit by the fire. Come downstairs, darling."

She made no move. He repeated his suggestion, and she said, "You go down, Boy. I'll be along presently."

"But you're cold. I saw you shiver."

He bent down. "Come on, darling, don't be so dispirited. If you like I'll give you a fireman's lift down the stairs."

She got up and, avoiding his arms, preceded him. Instead of going into the parlour she went to the kitchen, and he heard the faint explosion of the gas as she put the kettle on for tea. He tried to make conversation over tea, but she answered him perfunctorily.

At length she said, "I tried to get a job, Boy."

"Really, dear?" He could not control his eagerness.

"Yes, at some dressmaker's firm. I showed them some of my

sewing, and the manager said that he'd try to do what he could. When I phoned them yesterday they told me very politely that they couldn't do anything because I haven't a permit to do any other work than domestic."

"I see."

"I should have known. It's no good. And I can't get domestic work now, either, since that woman refused to give me a reference."

"No, no, darling. I wouldn't hear of it in any case."

They said nothing for a while, and then he said, "It wouldn't be such a bad idea for you to get out of here for a while, mix with people. Go places. Cooped up all the time in this place—I don't know how you can put up with it."

"Yes," she said.

"I only suggested a job because of that, you know."

"The money would come in handy."

"Don't let that worry you, darling."

"I wish I could get a job."

"It must be very trying to stay here all the time. When I came here last it was raining. It's raining now. It gives me the feeling it's been raining ever since," he said.

She said nothing.

He got up and went to the window.

"Shall we go out, just the same, Frieda? Shall we catch a bus down to the town and see one of those dud films?"

"I don't know what's showing."

"Have you a local paper?"

She found one and they looked up the amusements section. The film was a Wild West thriller some four years old.

"Depressing, isn't it?" he said.

She made no answer.

He looked at the clock. He was surprised how early it was, not yet seven. Time seemed to have stopped still.

"Shall we play draughts, Frieda?"

"All right."

They played for a while. She took a long time over each move. Once or twice he got up, whilst waiting for her, to have a look at something outside. No one seemed to have passed the cottage for an hour. In the midst of the third game she said, "I don't know why you beat me, darling. I think and think and seem to work out every possible move, but somehow I seem to lose." She laughed, and he was pleased to see her spirits restored.

"You look very lovely, Frieda, you know," he said gaily, exerting all his charm once more.

"You have a way of making that always sound so spontaneous."

"Silly! I mean it. I wish it was bedtime. Time seems to have stopped still, doesn't it?"

She said nothing.

But he seemed to have restored her good-humour and chatted gaily throughout the next few games, giving her first two, then four pieces start.

It was after eight now and he could not help thinking that in town the Farsons were out at some dance with the rest of the crowd. Melville and Haines and Judith and Helen and all that cheerful varied crowd, discussing everything from the latest personal scandal to sport or the war or the theatre. He could hear the cheerful jazz background, Helen's light laugh, Melville's droll sleepy voice telling some story, Bill Farson's gargantuan roar of happy derision as he capped the joke with one of his tall stories.

"... quite a pretty girl and very helpful," she was saying. "Her husband's in the navy and she's having her third baby. She's had to leave her home, which had been bombed, and has distributed all her offspring amongst her family. One was left with a crusty old uncle, who's a blue-nosed Tory and believes in Solomon's saying about sparing the rod. She's left another in the hands of her cousin, a painter, who believes in 'free love'. She herself travels from place to place in order to catch her will-o'-the-wisp of a husband whenever he comes to port. She says that the third child will be brought up in a luggage van. I can picture the meeting of these three after the war. Can't you, darling?"

She laughed and he grinned. She chatted thus brightly, relating every scrap of gossip she had encountered in the village; the story of the postman with the different women whose affairs he knew so well that he could synchronize his rendezvous as punctually as his postal service. When asked to explain the innumerable offspring that had resulted from these affairs at such brief intervals, he indicated his bicycle. Then she told about a confidence trickster who impersonated a major in the army and who had been dined by the most prominent gentry in the town, who had vied for his patronage at their table and who was later discovered to be an ex-occupant of the town gaol. So she went on and he chuckled heartily. Now and then they played yet another game.

At his seventh victory she began to reconstruct the moves to

find out where she had made her tactical mistake. At first he helped her, but suddenly he found his mind wandering. In the middle of a humorously plaintive appeal for an explanation of her error he said absently, "Darling, the more I think of it the less I understand how you can stick it. I must say that it does you credit—the way you stand being cooped up here, your patience. . . . I tell you what, let's go along to see that Wild West thriller. It's probably hellish, but maybe we can squeeze a laugh out of the thing."

Instinctively he got up and went to the window. "Yes . . . still drizzling. . . . The place looks absolutely deserted."

"That," she said, "makes nine."

He turned suddenly at the strange note in her voice.

"What do you mean, Frieda? What makes nine?"

She got up slowly and without a word went into the little hall. She came back with his coat and cap, which she handed to him.

He took them, foolishly standing there with coat trailing to the floor.

"What makes nine, darling?"

She took him by the arm and gently led him to the door.

"What is it, Frieda? What are you doing?"

She said very quietly, "It is the ninth time you got up to look out through the window. What are you looking for, Boy? Your freedom? This isn't a gaol although you behave as though it is. Nothing prevents you from leaving, you know. Don't keep getting up and going to the window with that forlorn expression of a convict. There are no bars and no bolts. You can walk out quietly by the front door."

"I don't—know—what you mean. I didn't——"

She said in the same calm way, "Poor Frieda! What patience she shows. You don't know how I stand it—being cooped up here all the time. Time seems to have stopped still, doesn't it? How bored you must be, poor girl. It seems absolutely incredible the way you put up with it."

"Frieda, I didn't mean——"

"I tried to do my best. I spent hours in redecorating the place. Days! I made new tapestries, introduced new colour schemes, used all my wits to make the place seem different, novel, fresh to you each time you came. I spent all my savings on buying a selection of records of the loveliest and most varied music ever composed which is so easy to follow that a child could listen to it with pleasure. But you did not even suggest that you would like to hear it. I know some of these cost a little more than one

usually pays, but so many things I made myself—these new curtains, these cushion-covers, so it did not exceed what one normally paid. But you noticed nothing—nothing at all. You want to see a silly film which you know will be deadly dull, but never mind, it will pass the time. I won't go with you, Boy, because I wanted to see you and not the dreadful film. When you want to be with me again, talk to me, share my thoughts a little, I'll be here."

The coat fell from his hands. A blind plunging feeling of tenderness, of pain came over him. He tried to take her in his arms, to press her to his heart, to make some amends, to express something of the passionate surge of feeling that went out to her, but she turned away.

She said quietly, "Oh, darling, it's no good. It won't help us, really."

"But, Frieda, it does matter. . . . I didn't mean what you said. . . . I still love you, love you. . . . It must come right. . . . it must! I'm terribly sorry, darling. You've no idea how much you really mean to me. . . ."

She said nothing more, but suddenly, impulsively, she pressed her face against his shoulder and spent her longing and pain in deep-drawn violent sobs.

QUIET days are dangerous. The grey sultry weather with its low clouds and mists made a perfect hiding-place for small formations of enemy aircraft; even solitary machines took advantage of such ideal conditions for a sudden swoop. The Fighter Command would wink an eye when one of their machines made a piratical flight over the Channel and paid a visit to enemy aerodromes. With the aces of the squadron it had become a sport; it relieved the monotony of the routine patrols. Boy or Stavenden or Bill Farson, munching a stick of chocolate or an apple, would often hop into a plane when they grew bored and sneak over the water, search the coastline for an enemy air base, hang around in the clouds with their engines shut off until an aircraft formation was about to take off, then silently they would flash out of the sky, and before the enemy machines had tucked in their undercarriages they would shoot off noses, stab through wing and aileron and send them down crushed like egg-shells.

It relieved the monotony of the aftermath of battle, it avenged the blind-bombing night raids on civilians, it kept the men fresh and in fighting trim.

Another popular sport was to patrol the enemy coastline practically at stratosphere altitudes and, under cloud-cover, pounce on absent-minded patrols, striding silently out of the sky after stalking the intended victim for miles. At these times the vertical dive attack and beam fire was favoured; the blow would fall on the back of the neck, sudden, ferocious and totally unexpected. It was not a good thing for the nerves and the erstwhile imperturbable supermen groomed for victory grew so jumpy that they sometimes sent frantic bursts into friendly machines patrolling innocently above them.

The Royal Air Force was preparing the way for its own offensive daylight sweeps. The lightning war had, in spite of its continental success, proved a flash in the pan in the Battle of Britain. "We beat them on the Channel," said Ross Haines, "we beat them over Dover, we beat them on the Thames Estuary, we beat them over London. We shall beat them over France, over Holland and Belgium. We shall go on beating them and beating them back until we've hunted them right back to their rat-holes in Berlin. The Germans say they are afraid only of two things: with Russia—space, with Britain—time. Well, here goes, fellahs. Have I got your attention? Put it on, Hayward, old son. Regulate it a shade faster, I think. 'Time on your hands.'"

Ten minutes later Ross Haines was killed.

Boy and Bill Farson had been playing two-handed bridge when the first attack came. There was the sound of aircraft, the roar of guns and then the crash of the anti-aircraft. Stavenden brushed aside a shower of splintered glass and dashed out to the aircraft that stood in readiness. Before he had gone ten yards he was cut down by machine-gun fire from the leader of the yellow-nosed Me. . . . Ross Haines and Farson were the next. Farson made it and was skimming above the trees in a few seconds. Haines' machine crashed in flames ten feet above ground.

"All right, men," said Murray, "one at a time. What the hell's the matter with the ack-ack?"

It was impossible to synchronize the dash to the waiting machines with a lull as the enemy were attacking singly, in a continuous stream.

Shells and bullets whined and crashed all about them as they lay on the floor.

"All right, stand clear."

Murray jumped up and dashed across the open field, his helmet flapping on his shoulders. He vaulted safely into his machine, there was the instantaneous roar of the engine. Then, another yellow-nose, diving directly on him, raked his aircraft with shell-fire. Murray slipped out of the burning Spitfire and sprang into the next. He was more lucky that time, and in a few seconds he was disappearing over the roof of an outlying hangar.

Digby jumped up and did the forty yards to his machine on winged feet. He vaulted, ducked and pressed the starter. The flying-field began to roll away slowly, ever so slowly, and above him a shadow was forming, there was a roar. Bullets hammered on his windscreen, ricocheted in his cockpit, and, remorselessly probing for a vulnerable spot, found the soft organ of his eye and bored into the vital tissue of his brain. His machine suddenly toppled over as though drunk and fell nose first, driving the control stick into his side.

As Boy got to his feet he was reminded of a game he used to play at school. It was called witch. A player stood facing the wall. Others had to creep up, run, dash or tiptoe behind him. If they were caught moving when he turned the player had to fall out. It was an exciting game. Sometimes you used to be caught when you were so close to your goal you had only to reach out your hand—

His feet seemed hardly to touch the ground as he flew towards his machine. He measured the distance as he approached and jumped with all his strength. He cracked his knee hard against the edge of the cockpit, but he felt absolutely no pain, only a faint tingling.

He did not look up as he heard the Nazi machine diving down. So that's what it's like. He pressed the starter. When would the fire begin? The roar of the diving aircraft grew in volume until his head was full of it. How slowly, with what laborious care, the Spitfire moved. It seemed to have no life in it. The Nazi aircraft seemed to fall athwart him like a hawk on a mouse, clapping darkness over his senses. When would it happen? When would it happen? His Spitfire scurried across the runway weakly.

There it was. A vicious roar and, as he bent down, the bullets whacked the cockpit smartly as a whip, a foot above his head. His scalp tingled. He felt as though a giant had a grip on his neck and was pressing him over a cliff. Then the green field shot

away under him and he was in the big sky, his element. He raised his head with an intake of breath as though he had shouldered away the giant.

Turning his machine sharply he swept in to attack. On the flying-field four more machines had been damaged irrevocably, which brought the total to nine. Even if the others could reach their aircraft only two more could join them at the moment. The Nazi squadron consisted of thirteen machines, four of which had been shot down by anti-aircraft and Bill Farson's Spitfire. Three against nine, and this was one of the crack squadrons.

Boy saw an enemy machine flash past, snaked in with a vicious twist of the rudder and drove home his first burst. The Nazi went down in a slow dive. Boy had no time to watch it. He was searching the mist for another.

He did not have to wait longer than a second. The Nazi hurtled past him blindly as though blinkered, and Boy flew low to intercept him. He caught him in the gun-sights for a dancing fraction of a second, lost him, caught him again, then had to pull the stick back to avoid a collision. Swearing heartily, he climbed a few seconds and then dropped like a stone as the Nazi screamed over the roof of the aerodrome for a low-level attack. Boy opened fire at two hundred yards and went on firing until he was less than ten yards away. Then he had to break away to avoid a smash.

The Me went spinning down, black smoke commingled with red and yellow sparks streaming away. Suddenly there was a faint explosion and the whole aircraft flowered into flame.

Boy was just beginning to feel that the sky was cleared when he saw the leader of the yellow-nose squadron diving head on to meet him. He turned his machine to face the enemy. Both roared forward to the remorseless meeting, both refusing to yield before the other. Steel gnashed against steel, fire clove with fire as though a high-voltage spark had bridged an air-gap in crackling fury. Boy saw the Me loom monstrously large, saw the squat-helmeted head of the pilot as a background to the whitish air-screw, flame spurted again and again.

He did not understand how he had been missed for a moment. Then, as he soared up in a rocketing climb, he realized that the other had been weaving in order to escape Boy's fire and, in doing so, had been unable to hold Boy in his sights. Then the head-on attack had succeeded in disturbing the Nazi. Boy grinned.

He swung his aircraft in a screaming turn and aimed it at the Nazi. The other turned once more to cross swords. Delicately

manipulating wing and rudder, Boy tried to nail the foe in his sights. Once more the other began that weaving motion. He was a past-master, judged distance to a hand's-breadth, slipped out of the sights like a weasel. Boy's trigger-finger itched, but he could not afford to waste any bullets with such a heavy job on.

"Come on, you yellow ace," he shouted against the wind. He was glad he had the leader, who was probably one of Goering's boy friends. What were they made of, these highly-publicized, glamourized, stiff-necked Prussians? They certainly seemed to know how to fly, but that wasn't enough. If he could meet his fire it would be a different story; if not he would hunt him down mile by mile. He would try a war of nerves and see who could stand up to it the longer.

Accordingly Boy hung grimly to his gun-button, gave his engine full throttle from the supercharger, and shot to the attack. This time it looked as though a collision would be unavoidable. Had he made a mistake? Was the Nazi expecting him to duck? Suddenly the Me flinched as though stung.

"There you are, my fine-feathered friend," he muttered, plunging down in pursuit, hanging on to the Nazi's tail as to a comet. He pressed the gun-button and saw his fire chip off bits of wing. He was very close now and could see most of the decorations on the aircraft, souvenirs of Spain, Poland and France, even some blue and white circles. "You ought to be in a glass case." He pressed the button again and his guns hammered.

But the Nazi had gone into a most impressive spinning dive, presenting an almost insuperable target, and as Boy felt the undercarriage of the Spitfire crack sharply under the strain of the tremendous power dive he suddenly realized the other's game.

"Oh, no, you don't," he muttered. He was just in time. Gently pulling back the stick inch by inch he broke out of his dive less than a hundred feet from the ground. The Nazi had tried to lure him into an uncontrollable dive.

He glanced up and saw the Nazi turn in a tight circle then into a steep dive all in a moment, nice to watch. Boy could not help admiring the exquisite control even as the latter stabbed down fire. With a twist of the rudder and a flattening down of wing he rose as a diver coming up for air, the shells streaming past harmlessly. But Boy had lost the initiative and the Nazi was cutting across his path sharply. Boy began to climb quickly in a series of smart turns right and left, unable to shake the other off. With a quick touch of the control stick he made a half roll, flying off in the opposite direction from his original course. The

Nazi flashed past, lost him and, before he knew where he was, Boy had banked and was closing in behind him. All his guns spoke bitterly for three seconds. He saw a fine trickle of flame shoot along the Nazi's fuselage. A moment later he dived into a wind current and put it out like a candle.

They met toe to toe like gladiators and exchanged another burst, their fire interlocking as before in some strange attraction of opposites and, full of warm hatred and admiration for one another, broke off. Boy watched the Nazi give the Roman salute as he passed and he returned the thumbs-up greeting.

This savage play continued for more than five minutes before another shot was exchanged. So dexterous, so sensitive were the aerobatics, so swift were they to anticipate each move that their toil and conflict was like some irresolvable aerial knot. Every move had its immediate counter-move, every thrust its parry, except that each thrust was a mile-long sword flashing at half the speed of the earth's revolution.

Then Boy lost the Nazi suddenly in a cloud layer. He skirted it and was about to circle when he suddenly realized that the other would most certainly try to double back and catch him napping. In a trice he doubled back himself to see his suspicion fully confirmed as the other dived blindly out of the clouds, passing right across his sights. Instinctively he gave a glancing burst then heeled over in hot pursuit. For a few seconds the Nazi wrestled with him, trying to shake him off, then—broke off the engagement and streaked for home.

Boy sensed a sudden exuberance. Something had gone wrong. The Nazi's nerve had cracked. Perhaps he had had a hot time before their engagement. Boy congratulated himself on his campaign of nerves. He pursued relentlessly and was dismayed when the Nazi took to the clouds.

He thought quickly. If he skirted the clouds it would waste time. The other would almost certainly make a bee-line for home, leaving Boy to follow a futile game of hide-and-seek. Boy therefore ignored the clouds and set his course at full throttle for the coast. He had hardly gone a few miles when he saw the aircraft in the distance, first a grey speck, then the size of a toy. He was only a few hundred yards away now. He held his fire till he was two hundred yards away. At the sound of the guns the Nazi turned like a hunted creature and drove straight at him, aiming his machine. There was a touch of desperation about it. Boy's nerve did not fail him, his hands were perfectly steady; he was cool, everything was crystal-clear to him. He

ignored the other's fire; until the Nazi was almost at point-blank range he eeled agilely. Then, with a subtle banking glide he swung in flush across the Nazi's flank and drove home a withering fire that lasted six seconds.

He was firing steadily whilst the other went down out of control. He pressed the gun-button again. There was no response. But no more was necessary. The Me was whining down, and as Boy swept low he heard the screaming crash of metal on concrete. The Nazi had fallen right across a main arterial road.

He congratulated himself on his luck. Had that Nazi held out another couple of seconds he would have had Boy at his mercy. He hoped he would meet no one else on his way home with his guns impotent. He felt naked somehow.

But before he had gone a couple of miles he ran slap into a running dog-fight between three Me's and a Spitfire. By the latter's markings he saw it was Farson's.

Farson seemed in a bad way. He was rolling badly, and although one of the Me's was damaged, too, the others were pressing home a flanking attack. Boy drew a deep breath. With a sense of cold desolation about him he turned his aircraft up and climbed to nearly six miles.

As he nosed down and set his engine at full throttle once more, he pushed his oxygen mask away and drank greedily of the rare air.

He saw his speedometer travel beyond five hundred miles per hour. What a grey day it was. He thought of Frieda and wondered what she was doing at the moment. He tried to think of something else, to keep his mind off what must happen. Well, he had had such good luck, it couldn't last for ever. But that it should end like this was rather painful. He hadn't a chance. The most he could hope for was that he could get back into the clouds before the Me's closed in, but it was a forlorn hope.

Now he was less than a mile away and diving so fast that the slanting earth seemed to reel rather than rise to meet him. He aimed his machine at the right flanking Me. He saw the Me break away from Farson's aircraft and turn to meet him. Well, it had worked, anyhow. He had managed to draw its fire.

He smiled grimly as he thought of the ancient tear-jerker, 'Greater love hath no man——' Was he really so fond of Bill Farson? Still, he could not see him brought down without doing all he could. Any moment now the Me would cut across to meet him, open fire.

With a curse he turned his machine directly at the Me like a projectile. He saw shell-fire. Still he continued to dive. His onslaught at that stupendous rate made the air scream around him.

Suddenly he saw the Me flinch and he smiled . . . but what was this . . . he could hardly believe his eyes . . . the bastard had turned off and streaked away for home!

Boy shouted with laughter.

But why was he so surprised? He should have known that the bold, confident move was often received like this. He must have given the impression that he had a whole squadron supporting him such was the imperturbable sweep of his attack.

Yes, he had a lot to congratulate himself on that day.

21

HE hesitated a long time before picking up the receiver.
"Hallo? Give me long-distance, please."

He got up to shut the library door so that the music from the ballroom would not disturb him. He hummed a tune as he waited. Charwell's library was an immense room, the swivel chair at the desk was astonishingly comfortable. It made him feel important sitting at the big desk. He played with a pearl-handled paper-knife.

"Hallo? Oh, how are you, darling?"

Her voice, in miniature, was a trifle indistinct.

"How are you, Boy?"

"Merry Christmas," said Boy.

"Thank you."

"What are you doing? It's nice to hear your voice. Did you get the parcel?"

"Yes. Thank you. It was sweet of you."

"Do you like it? What are you doing, darling?"

"Waiting for you," she said.

"Yes . . . I see. Darling, when I got home, you know, everyone was so full of welcome for the prodigal son that it's most difficult to get away."

"I see."

"They were all so terribly sweet, Frieda, and they had a dozen surprises for me, presents and what not. Most embarrassing. I couldn't just take them, raise my hat and go, could I? Some of

my friends came from Cambridge to see me. My old tutor, Jamie Featherstone. And Jo Blake, you know. He came all the way from Scotland."

"Yes, I see."

"And, of course, Richard and Judith and mother—in fact, everyone had made such elaborate preparations, you know, I couldn't possibly hurt them, could I?"

"I see."

"What did you say, dear? I can't quite hear you."

"I said, 'I see.'"

Boy ran the paper-knife over the bronze bust by Rodin.

"Frieda darling, it's awfully beastly to have to ask you, but as I've only forty-eight hours this time, would you mind——"

She said, "*Don't* say it. *Don't* say it, Boy. *Don't.*"

"But, darling, what can I do? What in heaven's name can I do? Do be reasonable. Please don't be hurt. What can I do? Don't you see how difficult it is for me? This is Christmas. Mother has hardly seen me since I was called up. She might never see me again. How can I go? What do you want me to do?"

"Oh, please don't say it. Don't talk about it, *please!*"

"And then everyone else, darling. Jo Blake. He really came all the way from Scotland, and Judith spent hours on shopping just to get the things I liked."

"Did they lie awake at night praying for you to come, Boy? Did they feel they were in prison until you came? Did they plan and arrange and plan a hundred, a thousand times to please you? Did they torture themselves with doubt about the way the curtains look, the flowers are arranged? Did they hate the shadow they threw whilst they waited and waited, not for an hour or two but for days and weeks, until the walls rose up to crush them, the air became unbreathable, the clock was a bitter enemy? Did they, Boy?"

"Oh, my God, Frieda, what do you want me to do? What can I do? Tell me!"

"You're not ever going to tell them, are you, Boy?"

"Oh, I've tried, I've tried, God knows. I tried to talk to Richard about it, someone in the family—God knows I've tried. Oh, God, what can I do? I feel so miserable it seems to crush my heart in. Frieda, don't you see how difficult it is?"

"You'll never tell them, will you, Boy?"

"Oh, Frieda, I'll try. What can I say? I'll try."

He leaned his head miserably against the bronze bust. He

heard the terrible gasping sobs and clenched his hand until the nails made red marks.

He could hardly speak above a whisper. "You know, Frieda darling, I still love you."

She said, "Boy dear, you won't let me die all over again, will you?"

When he finally left the library he had to go straight into the garden, freezing cold though it was, to get some air. He wandered around for half an hour without feeling the cold at all. In the darkness he touched a thorny bush and, before he knew why he did it, he had closed his hand fiercely over the sharp thorns. Later he wiped the tears from his cheeks, which had begun to freeze.

Quietly he returned to the house by the back door. His teeth were chattering and he was shuddering in such violent spasms that unless he could get some warmth he thought he would rupture himself.

As he ran up the stairs he met his brother.

"Holy smoke, what have you done to your face?" Richard was absolutely aghast.

"Nothing."

"Good Lord, come into the bathroom! Quick. How did it happen?"

Boy followed his brother, who pushed him in front of the mirror and said with kind severity, "There! Look at yourself! Been under a lawnmower?"

He dipped a sponge in some water and gently wiped Boy's face. "It's not your face that's cut, it's your hand. I can see now. Here, put some iodine on it. Now, don't squeal. I'll do it."

Boy watched him put it on. His brother looked at him blankly as Boy's expression did not change. "You can take it all right, can't you?"

"I only cut my hand. Later I touched my face, you see. That's all."

"Clumsy little beast, aren't you? What on earth did you do to your hand?" He laughed. "I always have to do these things for you, don't I, Boy? Remember?" He made a neat bandage. "See if you can move your fingers."

"Yes, it's all right."

"Comfortable?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Well, you'd better go down after me. I'll have to prepare mother for the shock of seeing her infant all dressed up."

Boy said, "I say, Dick, let's go somewhere and talk. Will you?"

"Of course. Got something on your mind?"

"Yes."

"All right, old son. Let's go up to our bedroom."

Richard sat on the bed and Boy in the armchair in the big blue room. All the rooms in the Charwell residence were designed in the tradition of the masters, Adam, Hepplewhite, Sheraton and so on. This was a Hepplewhite room, so smooth, so elegant that it ceased almost to be functional. Richard was frankly overawed, and as Boy made no effort to talk he rambled on about the furnishing, and then said, "It's jolly decent of old Charwell to ask the whole brood of Haywards down to see him here for Christmas. Still, I'm not fooling myself. We really owe it to you."

"Oh, dry up, Dick."

"My dear boy, you know it. Old Charwell is a tight old bird, but he broke down since last Wednesday, you know. Yes, that did the trick, I think. If you ask me I think you're going to do very nicely for yourself. As soon as the war is over or even before they'll fix you up. It will do the firm a power of good to have someone like you. Gives it tone, patriotic tone, you know."

Boy said nothing.

"By the way, Boy, how did it go off on Wednesday?"

"All right."

"Were you nervous?"

"Yes."

"What was it like? Tell me. Did you talk long?"

"It seemed long."

"What did you say?"

"Oh, Lord knows. Most of the time I was wondering whether I only had to answer questions or could start the conversation from a new angle."

"How did His Majesty look?"

"Oh, he looked very fit, I thought."

They said nothing for a time.

"Well, who would have thought it?" said Richard. "My kid brother. . . . You are sitting on top, aren't you? To hear old Charwell at the dinner-table. *Per ardua ad astra* and all that! He really has the directorial manner all right. I confess I don't care very much for the power and glory stuff, but I couldn't help being struck by what he said about courage. It's quite true

when you come to think of it. Courage is really the most vital quality, because without courage, no matter what other qualities a man may have—kindliness, good-will, idealism—they are useless unless he has courage to give them practical expression. Virtue, unchampioned, is impotent. And freedom and the rest. Yes, courage is a sort of lever, isn't it? I liked that bit. I think he's right, Boy."

Boy looked down.

"Well, what is it you wanted to tell me, Boy?" He did not wait for an answer long, but went on, carried away by his affection and pride. "Aren't you happy, old son? Is anything the matter? I should have thought you'd be no end bucked. You've achieved more in six months than would have taken you ten years in the normal course of events. I know you've had a fine start with Cambridge and all that, but you've shot right up to the top with the chance you've had. A D.S.O. at twenty-two and to have shaken hands with the King in Buckingham Palace—nothing can stop you now, you know. If you ask me, old Charwell needs you in his firm, you don't need him. You've got an entry anywhere now," he boasted happily.

"You're a dear old chap, Dick, you know," said Boy. "Don't you ever feel jealous?"

"No, not really," said Richard, swinging his leg. "I know you'll stick by me. Your glory is mine in a way. I'm honestly terribly happy for you. So is Judith—I need not mention mother and dad. So is Helen," he added with a quick look at him.

"Is she?"

"Now, don't fish. You know she is. She's proud as Punch. She thinks she inspired you." He laughed. "She is a sweet kid, Boy, but I don't have to tell you that. I was watching you with her to-night when you were dancing. She looks so pretty and fresh that she seems to float on air. I do envy you *her*, if you must know. But then I don't stand a chance. I wish I were in your shoes. She's such a fresh-looking kid you feel that it's a crying shame if some nice chap doesn't introduce her to the gentle arts. She'd spill fragrance like a rose-bud bursting into flower if you took her in hand. Why don't you? Get her away from the smooth roué Vereker. It'll be your good turn and she'll make you a grand girl-wife. They were all saying how well you looked together."

Boy said nothing.

"Well, what is it, old son?" said Richard at length, and lit a cigarette.

"Dick, I know you're a good-hearted chap and I badly need your help in this . . ."

"Well, go ahead. You know you can rely on me. Don't look so hurt. You look like a pup who's had its tail trod on. Whatever's the matter?"

"It's about some girl I met last summer. She's—I met her in a club, you understand—a night-club. She's——"

"Go on, old chap. You're over twenty-one."

"You see, Dick, she used to be one of the girls you could pick up."

"Yes, go on."

Boy said, "Oh, Dick, I don't know what to do. You must tell me what I can do. It's terrible. I'm in an awful mess about her. I——"

"Good Lord, Boy, you don't mean——" He stopped and looked significantly.

"What are you thinking?"

"My dear chap, if you want my help about that sort of thing, don't worry. I know a good family doctor——"

"No!" Boy jumped up. He pressed his hand to his face. Richard went over to him and put his hand on his shoulder.

"Buck up, old fellow. I know it's a shock, but there's nothing to worry about. Under modern medical conditions these things are easily dealt with."

Boy turned away with a shudder. "No, it's not that."

"But I thought you said you were in trouble——"

"Oh, for God's sake, stop it! Don't say that again! *Don't!*"

"Oh, all right. Sorry if I annoyed you. What on earth are you getting excited about? It's quite natural I should think—when you told me you were in trouble after——"

Boy pushed past him viciously and tore out of the room.

Then, in the early hours of the morning, Boy was suddenly glad—fiercely happy—that he was suffering so. The sharp pain he had felt when he deliberately crushed the thorns in his hand, the agony of the iodine burning into his blood was nothing to the suffering. He awoke from his fitful sleep with his heart beating, his tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth, shaken out of sleep by the sheer horror of his dream. She had been in prison and was condemned to death. She was in black. She sat in a corner of her cell, her hands on her lap speaking to him in their pathos, like the white broken wings of a dead bird. He did not know what to do to help her, and then, in the extreme passion of

his pity, he lost his senses and told her that she had been pardoned—although he knew it was not true—although he knew that he was mad to do this thing. Yes, he had deliberately forged a document to show her she was free. How terrible was his joy at her indescribable relief, how he wept at her happiness, how they clasped each other in their arms in ecstasy. But all the time the hours were ticking by and he knew that soon the warder would come to lead her to her death. What would she feel then? What false hopes could he forge then? He was rooted with horror at the thought. As soon as the very physical recoil awoke him he fell into another stupor, another mad dream. This time they were in the desert. They had travelled without water in the blinding heat for an eternity until they could have bitten off their tongues to drink sour blood such was their thirst. Suddenly he found a pool of immaculate ice-cold water. He stooped to drink—it was a mirage. But as he saw the ecstatic hope in her face he knew he could never tell her it was a mirage. He scooped up sand in his cup and offered it to her.

He dreamed that he was climbing a mountain. He found her, crippled and unable to move a step, on a crevice. Gladly he offered to carry her up to safety. As soon as he lifted her to his shoulders he was overcome with fatigue. He struggled and struggled and listened to her grateful fervent words, knowing that long before they would reach safety he would find the burden insupportable, that he would have to tear asunder the hands locked round his throat by which she clung to him.

All that night his mind was a mad-house in which were locked images of pain, pity and horror. It seemed the night would never end; again and again with crystal clarity and terrible insistence came that dreaded theme. When that grey light stole in between the curtains sleep came to him at last, a sleep of rest, for the human spirit can devise its protection against the most bitter purgatory, and in the mind of the man who conceived the pathos of the *Inferno* slept a seed of divine imagery.

The day broke cold and clear. There was a Christmas tree decked out in full seasonable glory on the little frozen pond, and a hundred candles were lit, reflecting their pale glow in the ice. Boy kissed his mother and his sweetheart under the mistletoe; he strolled with Helen in the garden. She was dressed in a Russian hat and furs, her small soft hands were kept snug in a white muff. Her breath was wine-sweet when they kissed.

A log fire burned in the baronial dining-room with its oaken table, its old polished silver, its Constable landscapes giving a

touch of green and the fresh vision of running streams. They sang 'Noel' and the servants joined them for prayers; presents were given from each, unto each. On this occasion the role of God was Honorary Colonel-in-Chief of the Imperial British Armies. Charwell brought out his best liqueur brandy, and they even drank a teaspoon of holy water from the River Jordan which the old patriarch had brought home from his travels in the East. Double Corona cigars were handed out—nothing is too good for our boys. Toasts were drunk to friends at home and overseas. Outside on the ice, the little Christmas tree was pointed with frozen fire when the sun shone on the snow.

And so Boy sat down to write his letter. He had to tear up three pages because tears left tell-tale marks on them. He had to put his hand to his eyes to stop the tears spilling on the page. Even then his writing was as smooth and methodical as ever, neat as ever, as though running on wheels. He wrote:

MY DEAREST FRIEDA,

I have tried and tried . . . but I can see no way . . . I find I cannot tell them.

No other way was possible. Some of my friends already know, and although they are to be trusted they would have told—in strict confidence—their closest friends, equally trustworthy, who would in turn tell their closest friends. As you know, I would have had to tell my people in the end. . . .

Frieda dearest, believe me, I have tried.

He looked up from the page. What would he tell her? How he was moved by a passion of pity? How he had suffered? How much he still loved her? How his heart broke with sorrow for her? God, he would spare her that.

He wrote:

I have tried to tell them, but I find I have not the courage.

Yes, that was all. He wrote his name. He also enclosed a cheque for fifty pounds. It was all he could spare in view of his obligations to his intended wife; a man cannot afford two homes. Even that amount was more than he could well afford as Helen would bring no dowry, but he need have had no qualms on that score, for the cheque was never cashed.

